

THE NEXT GENERATION OF MUSIC GAMING

IS MIKAMI'S LATEST PLATINUM QUALITY?

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF BRITSOFT SUCCESS

ALEX GARLAND TALKS VIDEOGAMES





The comedian Eddie Izzard once did a routine that will resonate with any child who's ever been encouraged to learn a musical instrument by a well-meaning but ultimately deluded parent. "You should play the violin," says the father, "because I never had the chance when I was a child." "Well, you've got the chance now," says the child. "Why don't you learn it now?" The parent, of course, makes his excuses. Because learning a musical instrument can sometimes feel like a special kind of torture – especially when you're young. ("I don't wanna learn," protests Izzard's reluctant student. "I want to go and smash things with hammers.") If only it was possible to learn to play a musical instrument – and a properly fun one like an electric guitar, not a violin or an oboe – via a videogame. The kind of videogame whose appearance on the cover of a magazine might be accompanied by a tiger. A tiger that's – you know – *made of flames*.

Following years of dismissal by closed-minded axe noodlers, the music game genre will finally gain some kind of credibility within sneery muso circles thanks to the release of *Rock Band 3*. Where previous *Rock Band*s could effectively start you off on a career thumping tubs, Harmonix's third iteration is compatible with a fully functioning guitar, allowing the player to engage with a sprawling suite of music tracks in a manner that is at once challenging, educational and entertaining. The game's keyboard functionality, too, is entirely faithful, encouraging the controller-button stabs of a previous generation's rhythm action to be polished and ultimately transformed into something that might actually be put to some use when you're not standing in front of your TV.

Which is not to say that *Rock Band 3* is being cooked up as some kind of strict self-improvement programme. Our time with Harmonix makes it clear that it is a game first – playable with all of your existing *Rock Band* kit – and one of the most ambitious pieces of multimedia software ever conceived second. Our report from the studio, which also includes a look at its dizzyingly energetic Kinect launch title, *Dance Central*, begins on p46.





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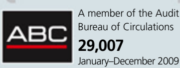
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"I hear even the mayor of Transylvania is going to be there!"



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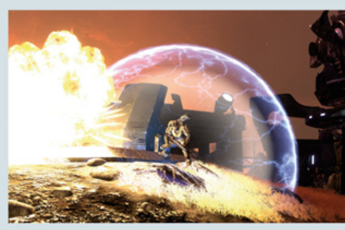
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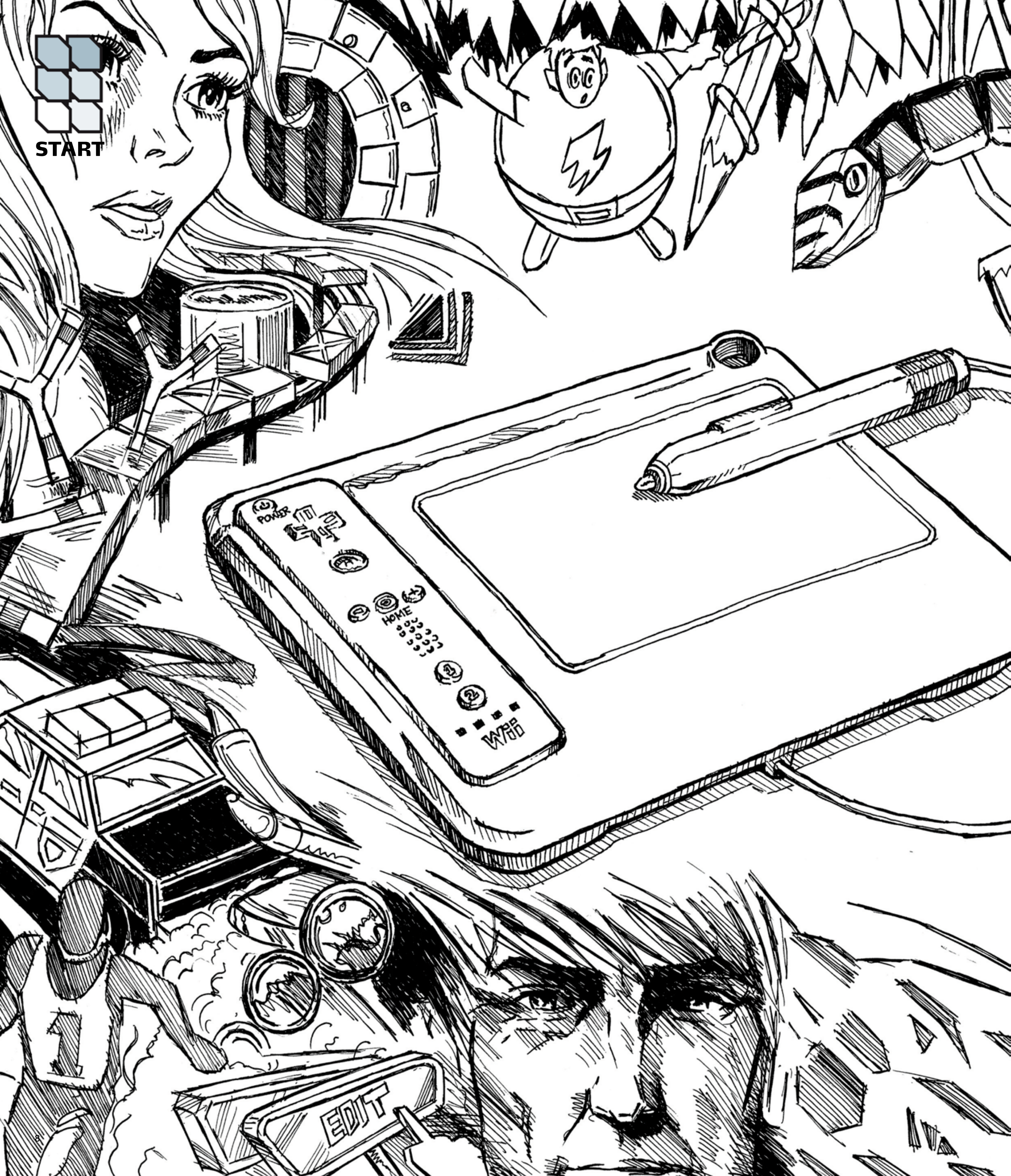











POWER
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EDIT







Artful innovation

As PS3 and Xbox 360 prepare to join the motion-sensing party, THQ takes Nintendo's console in another direction

With Microsoft and Sony poised to release their motion-control devices, Wii-related PR buzz has been somewhat muffled. Even Nintendo's own hardware focus has moved on to the 3DS. Though its sales remain extremely healthy, you'd be forgiven for thinking Wii was winding down. THQ believes otherwise, and has bet the fate of a new device on it. The device is uDraw, a Wii graphics tablet which allows you to wield a stylus against its slippery plastic surface and see the results appear on the TV screen.

Planned for release this November in the US, it will retail at $70 (£45), bundled with drawing software entitled Studio, and released alongside a uDraw-controlled platformer, *Dood's Big Adventure*, and *Pictionary*. The European launch is planned early next year at an unconfirmed price-point. This is "the tip of the iceberg" of THQ's forthcoming uDraw releases, according to **Martin Good**, THQ's executive VP of kids, family, casual games and global online services. Internally, it's being referred to as a "platform extension" rather than a Wii peripheral – a semantic distinction underscoring THQ's own hopes for its success, and a software support plan that extends into 2013.



THQ's Martin Good (above) and Wayne Cline are boldly confident of uDraw's success. Does THQ foresee developing similar devices for other platforms? That something it won't answer right now

"It's very hard to hold the Wii Remote steady when you try to draw something. It was a natural thought to give the players a device capable of much higher-fidelity drawings"

Although graphics tablets and direct pointing systems like the Wii Remote function in a similar way – providing a cursor at a particular screen coordinate – there is an obvious advantage to having a surface to press against while using that cursor to draw. "I think it was clear when we released *Drawn To Life: The Next Chapter* on the Wii," says **Wayne Cline**, director of product development at THQ. "One of the common issues is that it's very hard to hold the Wii Remote steady when you try to draw something. You end up with jaggy-looking images. It was just a natural thought at the time to give the players a device capable of doing much higher-fidelity drawings."

THQ's solution is a rectangular chunk of plastic which, in prototype at least, is nine inches wide, seven inches long and an inch and a half thick. This makes it a little longer and thicker than the Wii Remote itself – the reason being that the Wii Remote actually docks inside uDraw, its face buttons protruding through a panel in the tablet's surface for ease of access. The B trigger, meanwhile, is accessible at the tablet's back through a cut-out corner.

"The benefit of having the Wii Remote docked with the tablet itself is that we can use the accelerometers for motion control and the buttons are readily available right there," explains Cline.

But if it helps reduce some of the technology overhead for the tablet, then working out how to repurpose existing Wii technology has been quite the R&D juggling act. "The original method [we experimented with] was to diffuse the infrared beam from the Wii Remote and then broadcast it up under the drawing surface. The stylus was going to have an LED, and that's how it would detect its position. It was going to use all sorts of lenses and mirrors. But the tablet became so cumbersome – it became about the size of a shoe box – it was really large. So we went back to the drawing board."

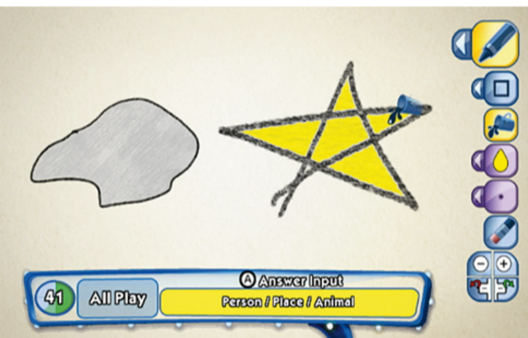
"Literally!" Good interjects.

"When you dock the Wii Remote with the tablet," continues Cline, "you can see inside the chamber of the tablet is a connector, exactly like the Nunchuk connector used by the Wii Remote. We're actually emulating the Nunchuk capabilities.



Illustration: **Mark Mitchell**







The most immediately engaging uDraw title we've seen so far is *Pictionary* (above), officially licensed from the popular pen-and-paper party game. The uDraw hardware itself, though fairly bulky, seems perfectly manageable in terms of passing the unit around the room





The Studio package, which will come bundled with uDraw, is all about accessibility. As well as doodling options, the software will present many others arty diversions aimed at younger Wii users



The tablet itself uses the exact same chip the Nunchuk does. On the stylus there are a few buttons which emulate the C and Z buttons on the Nunchuk, and its pressure sensitivity emulates the analogue ability of the Nunchuk's stick."

It's certainly a smart solution, and although the need to insert a Remote bulks it out, it also means that there's extra space beneath the drawing surface for a honeycomb structure, giving the tablet an extremely robust feel. This is not a precious piece of digital art equipment, but something that could conceivably be slung beneath your TV, or survive the weight of a clumsy child. It feels, in other words, a little like something Nintendo might produce. Indeed, THQ emphasises Nintendo's collaboration and endorsement from the start, and while you get the sense that this is partly to bolster a sense of legitimacy, it's clear Nintendo has extended a greater than usual level of support.

"Even at phase one, when we had a graphical engineer working on what it would look like, Nintendo were involved," says Cline. "They designed the software development kit for us and we've been working very closely with their Software Design Support Group on safety issues. There's actually a chamber underneath the tablet where the Wii Remote's wrist strap stores – that was a suggestion from Nintendo, so that we didn't have to ask players to remove the strap itself. We've even got our own safety screen that replaces the wrist strap screen."

It's also like something Nintendo might have made in another respect: it's existing technology, dusted off and spun around to face a new consumer market. Pixel-pushers on PC and Mac will hardly be blown away by the novelty of a graphics tablet, and uDraw itself is far from cutting edge. Compared to the drawing devices of a similar size and spec from market leader Wacom, which retail for less than £60, uDraw seems crude. Its awkwardly thick stylus comes with a tether to the tablet, and its small drawing surface is glossy and slippery – at least on the prototype model. Wacom tablets allow you to lift the pen a comfortable centimetre and a half from the surface before it stops tracking the position of your cursor – uDraw's limit is much lower. In the alpha version of the bundled painting software, there is also a slight lag in movement, and there's none of the additionally functionality that Wacom has introduced to its products over the years, like angled brush strokes and multitouch. Then there's the inherent limitation of the Wii hardware's graphics resolution itself. But that's really the clue to uDraw's potential success: this is a device aimed at those who won't really care about those sorts of things. In fact, what would be flaws in the digital art market – its thickness, the stylus' thickness, its tether – are all things the young audience might benefit from.

But Studio, the bundled graphics software, is perhaps not quite so clearly an easy sell to a young

This is not a precious piece of digital art equipment, but something that could conceivably be slung beneath your TV, or survive the weight of a clumsy child

Newswire



Facing up to 3D

As the game industry continues to launch itself into the 3D era, with titles like *Killzone 3* pushing the technology, an event at the National Media Museum in Bradford is aiming to address the many issues surrounding the transition.

Screen Yorkshire and Game Republic have announced 3D In Your Face, a two-day event on October 21–22 that will feature sessions and panels with those best placed to give fresh, relevant perspectives. Of the attendees Mick Hocking, senior director of SCEE and director of Sony's World Wide Studios' 3D Stereoscopic Team, should provide a valuable, intimate viewpoint. It's part of a planned three-month celebration of 3D history at the venue, from photography to television and film. Presentations will, of course, be in 3D. Head over to www.screenyorkshire.co.uk/gamerepublic for more info.







Wacom users may sniff at the tethered nature of its pen, but the uDraw hardware is squarely aimed at the family fun market

audience. It has some cute features – tutorials, colouring-book modes, and the ability to replay the progress of your drawing, stroke for stroke – but the clumsy and overcomplicated UI of the early alpha build undermines both instantaneous paint-splatting satisfaction and serious artistic intent. You can save your daubings to the SD card, and so transport them to your PC or printer, but there's no in-built sharing mechanism on the Wii console itself – a dictum from Nintendo.

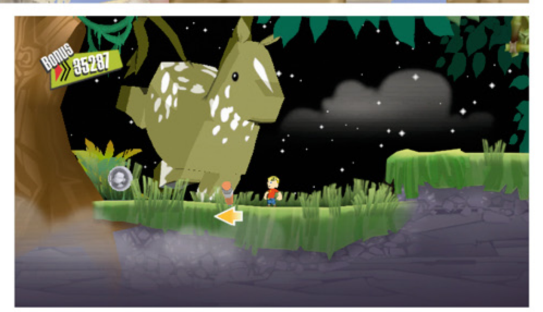
"Nintendo is very careful about what it allows being shared," says Cline. "Obviously we respect that, and are concerned as well; we want to give people a method of taking their drawings elsewhere, via the SD card, but we also want to make sure people aren't sharing things that other people don't want to receive."

Then there's the rest of launch line-up. *Dood's Big Adventure* pays homage to *Kirby: Power Paintbrush*, *Soul Bubbles* and *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz*, but you wonder how much of its control could adequately be served by the Wii Remote alone. Nonetheless, as with *Drawn To Life*, there's the opportunity to embellish the game's characters and scenery with your own designs. But the real heavy hitter here is clearly *Pictionary* – a polished and inventive take on the board game which sees players pass the tablet as they take turns. It's just as much fun as Pictionary itself and, unlike many digital adaptations of board games, justifies its existence with mechanics that wouldn't be so easily possible on paper. In its Pictionary Mania mode, players must attempt to draw while the canvas spins, or with limited ink, or using only straight lines, or without lifting their stylus.

Will the addition of digital rules be enough to tempt people to fork out for the $70 bundle, plus the cost of *Pictionary* on top, when the cardboard version is available for £25? Quite possibly. People bought Balance Boards, and you can stand on one leg for free. Needless to say, THQ is very optimistic, saying that the North American retailers it has spoken to have been clamouring to ensure that they have enough stock come the product's retail launch in November.

"We're expecting about 600,000 units to go out into the North American market [at launch]," says Good. "We are somewhat restricted by way of manufacture. We've had retailers asking: 'How many will we be allocated?' The feedback from both Nintendo and retail has been so significant."

Nintendo has been wrong before, of course, not least with the disastrous launch of *Wii Music*, but if this response from retailers does translate to actual consumer interest then it has significance well beyond the fate of uDraw itself. Microsoft and Sony hope that Kinect and Move will capture casual consumers and deliver 360s and PS3s into new homes; THQ's bold move, and promise of ongoing commitment, suggests that it believes the installed base of some 73 million Wii owners will not be looking to new consoles this Christmas, but extending the ones they already own in interesting new ways.





Could *Dood's Big Adventure* (above) be the greatest revolution in control since *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat* took charge of GameCube's bongo drums? Doubtful, in these days of Kinect and Move, but we look forward to seeing what THQ can do nonetheless



Reach for the skies

Ten years, millions of units, an armada of fans and two Edge 10s – where does Bungie get the energy?

Has it really been a decade since we said the F-word and swore by Microsoft's original black box? An undeniable role in that cursing and subsequent mouth-washing was Bungie's salute to – and redefinition of – the firstperson shooter. Now, we ask community director **Brian Jarrard** and lead campaign mission designer **Niles Sankey** how and why *Reach* is the most rich and customisable *Halo* yet.

"I think we've learned that people like to fight Elites more than Brutes. Also, people don't like having to go back through a mission in the opposite direction"

What lessons have been learned in a decade of *Halo* games?

Brian Jarrard: For every aspect of every game that we've made that's been critically acclaimed and lauded by fans internally, we always find ways to find fault with it. We're very introspective and self-critical at the studio and I think that's what drives us to keep trying to make each game better than the one before. [With *Reach,* we're] getting back to the sense of *Combat Evolved* in terms of the mission design. Not to say later *Halo* games were flawed, but priorities and the approach changed slightly as the franchise progressed.

Niles Sankey: That's absolutely it – we wanted to get back to what made the original *Halo* so unique and fun. With a lot of the levels [in *Reach*] we get back to this notion that there's a big world to explore; this isn't just a canyon or hallway we're pushing the player through – this a world. It goes hand in hand with the philosophy of the sandbox which is 'almost anything can happen' – every time you play the game you should always have a unique story. We get back to the first *Halo* with that sense of exploration and a huge, breathing world.

BJ: I think we've learned that people like to fight Elites more than they like to fight Brutes – I think we would agree with that. People seem to really love the *Halo 1* pistol, and we've found a way to bring back something that feels very similar. Also, people seem to really enjoy missions that offer diverse gameplay and don't like having to go back through a mission again in the opposite direction. With *Reach* you'll find it's very paced out. There's going to be unique stuff thrown at you all along the way; you'll never replay a section





Niles Sankey (top), lead campaign mission designer on *Halo: Reach*, and Brian Jarrard, Bungie's community director



With armour abilities, new vehicles and the most advanced Forge yet, *Reach* is an epic love-letter to fans, and the series, that helped make Bungie its name

– there are twists and turns packed into every single mission.

Was it difficult mapping a narrative to such a freeform approach to gameplay?
NS: That's definitely one of the biggest challenges. We give the player a lot of freedom and of course at the same time people want a story that's moving and has purpose with stages to it. We had to really think about how we take this open-ended game and find the points at which we can bring it together and tell a story. We spent a lot of time working on AI and animation systems so that when you spend time with Noble team they are believable.

How do you then map a co-op experience on to this strong sense of a team/character?
NS: We didn't want it to work like the Master Chief, where everyone was the same. What we wanted was everybody to create their own Spartan and create their own identity. That extends into co-op where every player – up to four – can each deck out their armour, playing as their own character and experience the story.
BJ: Definitely not like *ODST*, which intentionally had you hop character to character. But the similarity is that they're both character-driven stories with strong personalities, and people you got know on a human level. Some of that does carry over [to *Reach*].

In our recent article looking at the games of the decade, the Bungie team cited a number of literary influences on *Combat Evolved* – what were your inspirations for *Reach*?
NS: Obviously Bungie is a huge fan of a lot of pop culture – things like Battlestar and Star Wars…
BJ: Certainly *Combat Evolved* itself, but when we put together flavour reels at the start of the creative process we looked at things like Band Of Brothers, Seven Samurai – those types of non-science-fiction affairs were what we drew inspiration from in terms of telling the story of a team and connecting that on an emotional level with the audience.

Visually, *Reach* seems to have a much more muted, darker palette – is this the most mature *Halo* yet?
NS: That's one way to look at it. We wanted to differentiate this game from the previous *Halo* games and one of the ways was to change the art direction. Obviously the story is a lot darker – we had to tell a tragic story because everyone knows the planet is pretty much destroyed by the end. To complement that we consciously went into the darker tones, but there's always a love at Bungie and in *Halo* for vibrancy. When you play Firefight, for example, where a lot of the maps are taken from the campaign, there's still a very rich palette – this isn't a game about browns and greys, even though there is an element of that.

Seeing the new airborne Falcon vehicles, we can't help but recall James Cameron's Avatar.
BJ: Even when I saw Avatar I was thinking the same thing, with the atmosphere, the fog, the lush green hillsides and even our VTOLs and their VTOLs… There's similarities there, but a lot of that is common in science-fiction works.
NS: There's certainly a shared influence between Bungie and Cameron. *Halo* had a lot of influences from Aliens. These things come full circle.

Sticking with the movie thread, do you think a *Halo* film could ever work?
BJ: I think it can – I think we'd all love to see it happen some day. Fortunately we're in no hurry and thankfully neither is Microsoft – it would have to be the right people with the right motivations and the right subject matter. I don't think a *Halo* movie based strictly on any of the *Halo* games would be all that great, but the universe is broad enough that there are a lot of lives to be able to tell new stories.

OUT THERE



THIRSTY LIKE A WOLF

Since when did promotional tie-ins become so… English? After the cute overload of the *Okamiden* plush toys, the next step in Capcom's merchandise mystery is here. The Okami Teacup Set comes in a wooden box and is made up of two hand-painted cups for your divine delight. The deal is sealed when you realise the cups are heat-sensitive, transforming from dark to light as you bestow them with Earl Grey. With an import price-tag of nearly $70, pray to the heavens for a careful postman.

tinyurl.com/okamitea





Doctor Move

We talk with Dr Richard Marks, senior researcher for SCE's US R&D, and the man behind PS3's new motion controller

It's easy to take hardware for granted. Whereas the constant drip-feed of concept art, screenshots and press releases ensures that software develops in front of our eyes, hardware tends to emerge fully formed, months and years of engineering forgotten in a moment of onstage fanfare.

Dr Richard Marks (above) is one of the people responsible for designing and bringing new hardware to life. Having studied avionics at MIT, Marks went on to receive a PhD from Stanford, working in underwater robotics, before turning his talents to worthier pursuits. Working in the PlayStation R&D department, he conceived and developed Sony's EyeToy, released in 2003, and was later involved in the development of its PS3 successor, PlayStation Eye. His work since then has culminated in Move, which uses the Eye tech's camera in conjunction with controller-based motion and orientation sensitivity.

> **"The reason we wanted to have something in your hand is because there are so many more experiences which are enabled when you do. It feels good when you swing something"**

How did you settle on the technical solutions for Move?

We looked at lots of possibilities. We looked at lots of sensors – ultrasonic, magnetic and so on. We also did as much as we could before that with just the camera. The most capability came from what we chose. The sensors inside [the controller] are very good at telling the angle that it's being held at and recognising the motion that's happening. The camera we've always liked because it's got good position tracking – it knows where you are in the room. The camera also has a whole bunch of other benefits. It can track your body, and you can use it as a communication device – it has a microphone array you can use for voice input. It has a lot of flexibility. And the reason we wanted to have something in your hand is because they're so many more experiences which are enabled when you do. You can use it for selection; you can use it to shoot with. It feels good when you swing something.

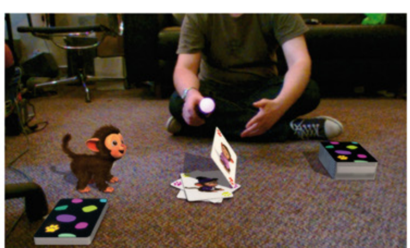
What do you make of Microsoft's position, which says that one controller is too many?

I don't think that point of view is quite right. When we did EyeToy we wanted to create a new way to play games but we didn't want to replace the existing way. I think that you can do some things really well with just a camera, or just a 3D camera, but there's just some stuff you can't do as well. And there's a bunch of experiences you could never do as well. I think our system is really flexible because we still have a camera – we could still do all the stuff EyeToy did and more – but we also have this more high-fidelity controller which you hold in your hand and is tracked really accurately, and you have the buttons.

You don't think buttons can be intimidating to certain types of potential players?

Buttons are irreplaceable as an input device. Too many buttons are overwhelming, but one single action button is very powerful feeling. For core games you really do need a set of buttons to quickly choose things. Trying to replace buttons with gestures doesn't work very well.

For Kinect to work, Microsoft will have come up with new concepts based around controller-free gaming. Do you think Move







The games arriving during Move's launch window include updates to existing titles, as in the case of *EyePet: Move Edition* (above left); slick takes on existing concepts, like sports compilation *Sports Champions* (above centre); and *Tumble* (above right), a puzzler which shows off the depth-sensing capabilities of the controller. Previews of all these games, along with *Heavy Rain: Move Edition* and more, appeared in E218

SOUND BYTES

"[I'm] baffled by the fury of adult gamers! These are grown (?!?) men who sit around all day playing computer games with one another who've today chosen to enter the real world just long enough to complain about my story slamming a Raoul Moat version of *Grand Theft Auto*! You would think I'd denied the Holocaust!!! [I] think I'll challenge them to a virtual reality duel… stab… I win!!!"
Intrepid Daily Star journalist **Jerry Lawton** refuses to let facts stand in the way of his quest for the truth

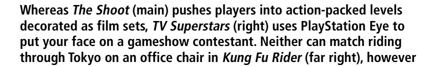
"We made no attempt to check the accuracy of the story before publication and did not contact Rockstar Games prior to publishing the story. We also did not question why a best selling and critically acclaimed fictional games series would choose to base one of their most popular games on this horrifying real crime event."
In a lengthy apology, **The Daily Star** admits to losing its real-life duel with Rockstar's lawmen

"They look like businessmen. The cabaret girls have incredible outfits. The hosts in the game are dressed like hosts. Somebody did his homework."
Shirokawa, a 'high-ranking boss' yakuza, reviews *Yakuza 3* on Boing Boing. Nagoshi certainly doesn't mind a bit of research

"Most of us having been doing this since we were seven – if someone's the cop, someone's gotta be the robber, someone's gotta be the pirate and someone's gotta be the alien. In *Medal of Honor* multiplayer, someone's gotta be the Taliban."
Amanda Taggart, senior PR manager for Electronic Arts, addresses the ethical implications of a deathmatch in Kabul







Whereas *The Shoot* (main) pushes players into action-packed levels decorated as film sets, *TV Superstars* (right) uses PlayStation Eye to put your face on a gameshow contestant. Neither can match riding through Tokyo on an office chair in *Kung Fu Rider* (far right), however





During our interview Marks was keen to demonstrate the importance of the Move controller's illuminated orb as part of its positional tracking capability, 'tricking' it by slowly covering the light to simulate stepping farther away. You can test it yourself when it launches on September 15







is better suited to brand-new ideas or twists on existing ones?

I think whether Microsoft succeeds or not really depends on whether or not people think that buying Kinect for that set of experiences makes sense. With Move we wanted to make sure that we had a wide enough range of experiences that it worked as a platform device for us. So we could really say that, no matter who you are, you'll really want this controller, even if you've never played a game or you've been playing the hardest core games of all. I think Move is good for adding a spatial dimension to existing experiences. The thing people don't quite realise yet is that it is a completely new way to interact. It is a 3D virtual reality kind of device, where if there's 3D scene you can reach directly into the screen, manipulate things and navigate around the space in a new way. That's the part that I think hasn't quite dawned on everyone yet. We don't yet have enough experiences showing it, but we're starting to get those.

When are games going to begin teasing out some of Move's less obvious potential?

I think that people will figure it out over time. We're building more and more experiences over time that use Move. A lot of the teams didn't know what Move would be able to do when they started making their game designs. They knew some fundamental capability so they built their design based on that, and Move delivers that capability for those games. But when you get the controller in your hand and start to play with it for a while you realise there's new possibilities to work with. And now some of the developers have had that time so their concepts will evolve. Just as with any new platform, it takes time.

So, do you think the launch line-up is an overly conservative one?

I think what you see now is the set of experiences people knew they'd be able to do with Move before they even had it in their hand, and it's also their first design experience with it. It takes time to be an expert when designing a new capability. I think the launch titles show a good breadth of different things: a firstperson shooter, party game, sports sim, and in the launch timeframe we have action adventure and RTS. I think the breadth of experiences is there and I think the way that Move gets utilised will evolve a little bit more in the future. The most obvious way to use it is a clear 1:1 perfect match with what you're doing. I think that will evolve more and people will realise that Move's really just a data source.

Would you be confident putting a timeframe on how long it'll be before we see some more experimental things?

I think very quickly you'll see some very new kinds of concepts in small doses, like in PSN games. I think game developers will investigate what's fun and what isn't and then the things which really do feel great will go into the more triple-A titles.

Which possibilities that have been under-explored are you most excited about?

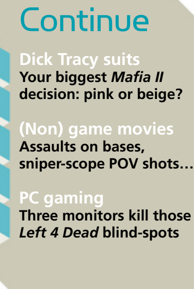
Realtime strategy is the easiest one to answer with. It's just not a genre which exists on the console and I think Move will enable it. There's actually ways to explore it which are different to what you'll think of. You can use Move as a direct mouse replacement but you can use it as more than that. Having a 3D virtual world navigator and manipulator – I think there's a lot of new gameplay experiences in that. You really just feel like you're in there, and want to reach in and do stuff. It [feels] like you're controlling something that's happening in that virtual space in a really direct way.



SOFTWARE

Rhyme plays

If developer 4mm Games had 99 problems, the pitch wouldn't be one



Continue

Dick Tracy suits
Your biggest *Mafia II* decision: pink or beige?

(Non) game movies
Assaults on bases, sniper-scope POV shots...

PC gaming
Three monitors kill those *Left 4 Dead* blind-spots

Quit

PC gaming
The electricity bill will never be the same

Getting into shape
Wheezing as you play *Dance Central*'s OK, right?

PSP debug kits
Roughly as portable as a ball and chain

With the next wave of sophisticated post-Wii, motion-sensing technologies very soon to hit the market, *Def Jam Rapstar* is a stark reminder of how few games have successfully emulated *Singstar*'s essential insights about enticing massmarket players since the first game's release six-and-a-half years ago. The franchise obliterated not only the issues standard controllers present for many non-gamers, but also bypassed the partial solution – made a phenomenon by *Guitar Hero* the following year – of a special music peripheral as a videogame metaphor for the real thing. *Singstar* came with a microphone (or two), and that was that.

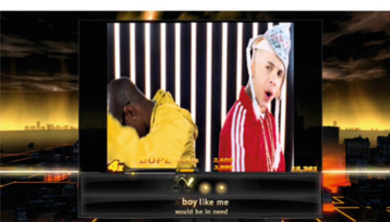
It also dispensed with a polygonal gameworld and simply presented PS2 owners with the real videos and the real songs, and a tangible capacity for real feedback on (and playback of) what had been sung into the real microphones. It was all wrapped up in a breezy, unobtrusive, Pop Idol-esque graphic identity and interface.

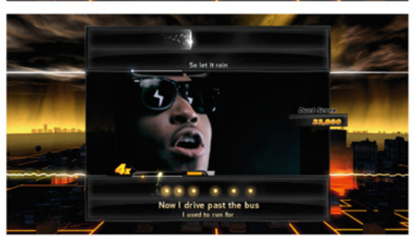


If you liked karaoke and the featured acts but weren't a gamer, there was no actual game to get in the way. Inflict the generic avatars of *Rock Band* or *Guitar Hero* on a music-loving non-gamer after seducing them with *The Beatles: Rock Band*, and you're reminded how clever that was.

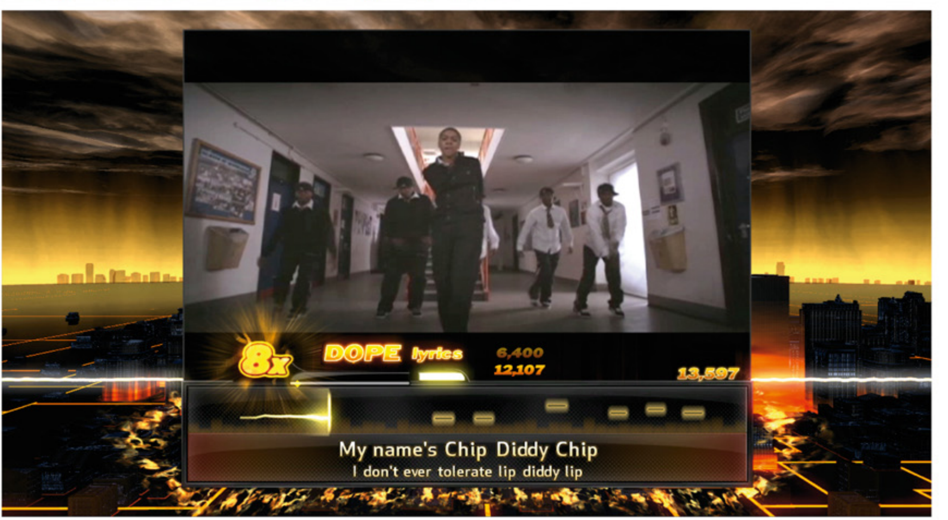
Jamie King (above) co-founded Rockstar Games, and left the company in early 2006 "at what seemed the most elegant time", with the company's RAGE engine up and running and his initial input in the company's *Table Tennis*, *GTA* and *Midnight Club* titles in motion. He and fellow Rockstar founder Gary Foreman founded 4mm Games in New York the same year, and their first title, due for release in November, retunes the *Singstar* paradigm for hip-hop, incorporates a fundamental structural commitment to social media, and – in addition to over 40 licensed videos – arguably the most iconic label in rap's history.

The new startup's executive vice president was Paul Coyne, who had formerly worked at Def Jam, and who introduced King to Kevin Liles, current CEO of the label and the man who, in earlier roles at the company, oversaw the extension of the music brand into new fields like stand-up comedy. "And," King recalls, "he was like: 'I've registered *Def Jam Rapstar* – do you wanna make a hip-hop music game with me?' and I was: 'Duh! Done'."

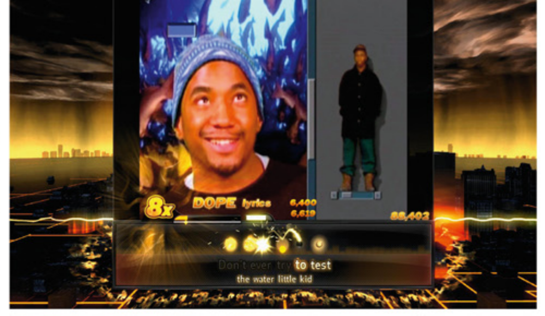


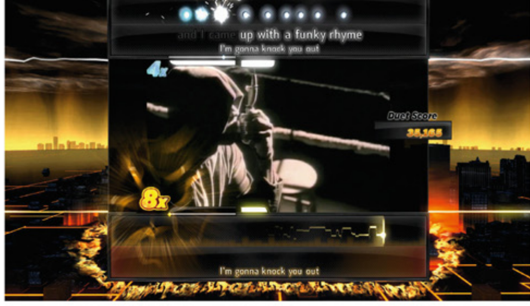


There are 200+ tracks lined up as future DLC, which is wise because no initial tracklist, however good, could hope to fit all schools of fans. Tinie Tempah and Wiley will be among the artists in the UK edition



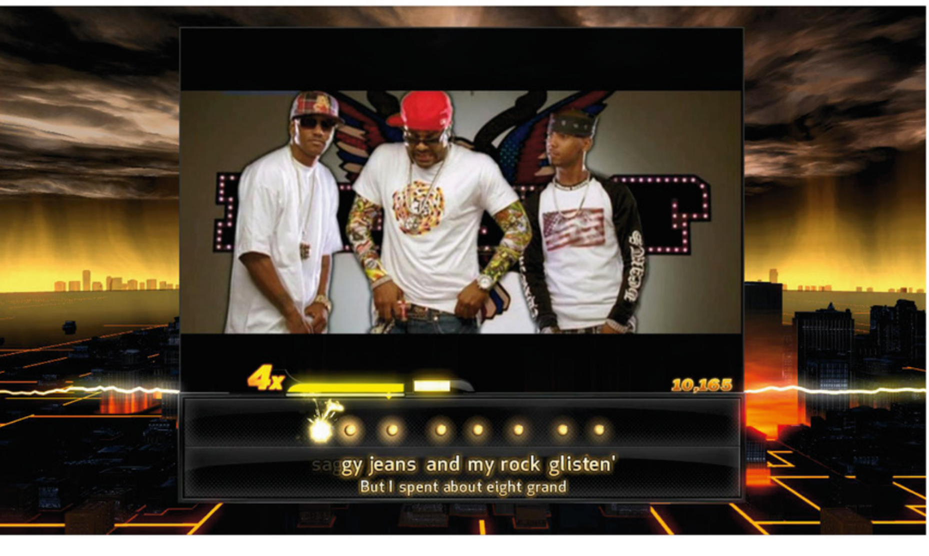












The interface uses a *Singstar*-style guide to convey the required pitch and syllable stress. Our attempts at a few verses suggest that it's well implemented and able to reasonably gauge word formation as well as tonal accuracy. You can't simply mumble along in time or tune

King always knew what he didn't want to do with the genre: "I didn't want to do avatars." The 2004 PS2 game *Get On Da Mic* used *Guitar Hero*-style avatars for a rap game and, despite its impressive tracklist, that 'adventure mode' mentality and aesthetic meant it was largely dismissed as a curio. "I don't want to start in a shitty bathroom," King says when reminded of the title, with 4mm having already put it about that the game was their model of everything not to do

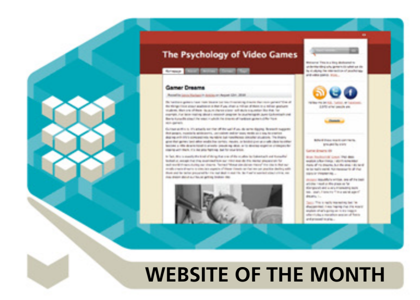
"I don't want the graphics to be shitty. We're never going to make an avatar that's hip-hop – we'd get slaughtered. I wanted it to be about the camera, you being the star"

with *Def Jam Rapstar*. "I don't want the graphics to be shitty. We're never going to make an avatar that's hip-hop – we'd get slaughtered." In place of a designed 3D gameworld, and in mind of the budget available, King says: "I wanted it to be about the camera, you being the star, looking at how the world is flat now and everyone's about making themselves a global star and branding themselves. So we thought, 'Let's make it about the camera and community, because we do want to have an online game with digital distribution. Let's push the consoles in battling and rapping – and it's all synchronous, which is perfect for it'."

And that – bar convincing suits that the formula for a rap game was a winning one ("Every publisher's like: 'Why would you want to make a game about hip-hop? Look at the charts, country is…' and I'm like: 'No, no, no. It's about engagement'") – was pretty much that. Clearing the tracks, not optimising the framerate, was the real development triumph here. In keeping with Liles' big-picture approach to branding, those tracks are taken from way beyond the Def Jam roster, and range from '90s classics from Tupac, Dr Dre and Notorious BIG to recent homegrown hits specially tuned to each major territory (for the UK, that means Tiny Tempah and Tinchy Stryder).

Playing means rhyming along to your chosen song in the familiar bouncing-ball style, with tone and enunciation measured and scored upon while watching the original video as your performance is filmed on your console's camera. The audio and video from your recording can then be post-produced with a suite of effects, tricks and filters, and the best chunks of your performance uploaded near-seamlessly to the game's online portal as well as Facebook and YouTube. Players and their posses are encouraged to stoke rivalries and issue challenges through the game's integration with those networks.

"This was the chance to do the real hip-hop game," says King. "Even the music industry's been talking about it for years." Virtual rap-star status plus perpetual playground politics via console and the apps on the mobile phone in your pocket? There's every chance that the globe's inexhaustible supply of hip-hop-loving gamers will be unable to resist.



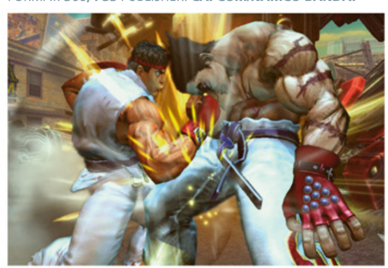
WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Jamie Madigan's blog is an engaging series of discussions focused on some of the psychological issues raised by both gamers and designers. Want to know why 3D Realms kept pouring money into the development of *Duke Nukem Forever*? Or why you probably shouldn't trust a friend whose in-game avatar looks absolutely nothing like they do in real life? Or what *World Of Warcraft* has in common with a slot machine? Madigan offers some answers. Much of the appeal of his writing is his focus on the thought processes which occur outside of games – such as players' relationship with payment structures, beta access and special offers – as well as those within. At the very least, reading some of his thoughts might make you pause for a moment before splashing out on that next Steam bundle.


Site: The Psychology of Games
URL: www.psychologyofgames.com

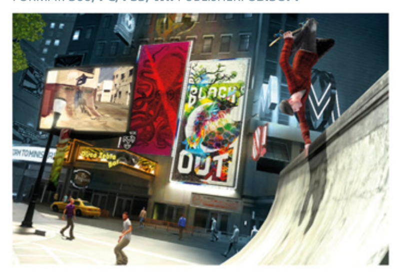
INCOMING

Street Fighter X Tekken/Tekken X SF
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM/NAMCO BANDAI**



Kazuya or Ryu? Nina or Chun-Li? Yoshimitsu or Vega? These two games, from competing teams, are intriguing prospects. Will either get the balance right? Sega's *Fighters Megamix* is the precedent

Shaun White Skateboarding
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, WII** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**



Bringing the mundane urban jungle to life with your skateboard calls to mind *Okami*'s brush strokes and *Jet Set Radio*'s beautiful vandalism. Outmanoeuvring the *Skate* series is a tall order indeed

Fist Of The North Star: Ken's Rage
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **TECMO KOEI**



The masters of crowd-controlling hack'n'slash take on the iconic manga character. A nuclear disaster means plenty of mindless enemies after your flesh. Only fair you give them your fists first

BlazBlue: Continuum Shift
FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ZEN UNITED**



Is this a beat 'em up renaissance or the riding of *Street Fighter IV*'s coattails? Either way, the premise of better roster balancing for the already engaging *BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger* is welcome

Batman: Arkham City
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**



The Dark Knight returns along with fanboy-darling developer RockSteady. Feline felon Catwoman's presence proves that the DC Comics treasure chest is going to be mined once again

DC Universe Online
FORMAT: **PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SOE**



A long time gestating, an MMOG with the great superpowers of DC's icons will require the great responsibility of delicate balancing to get right. *City Of Heroes* will take some toppling

John Daly's ProStroke Golf
FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **O-GAMES**



Gusto Games has built its title around Sony's Move, rather than adapting to fit it in. With a firstperson view and 1:1 club tracking, you'd better get some practice in. A raging thirst is optional

James Bond 007: Blood Stone
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, DS** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**

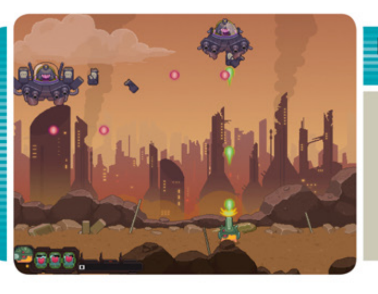


Bizarre Creations collides with the Bond franchise resulting in land, sea and air thrills. If *The Club*'s thirdperson shooting can be fused to *Blur*'s road rage in an Aston, we could be in for a treat

Plants Vs Zombies
FORMAT: **360 (XBLA)** PUBLISHER: **POPCAP**



Should we just set up a direct debit to PopCap? The irresistible addiction returns with two multiplayer options. Cooperative and versus play are just two of the seven modes on offer here



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Bullethead

www.nitrome.com/games/bullethead

Adrenaline rushes aren't commonplace in the Flash game world, which makes *Bullethead* worth adding to your bookmarks. Visually, it's *Space Invaders* by way of Futurama, bubbly blasting that rewards the reflexes of the brave and the tendencies of the suicidal. Placing yourself in the direct line of a descending alien bomb to earn points by blowing it into chunks is the order of your miniature hero's day.

With two players comes a need for cooperation – not least because you'll be sharing the same keyboard. The option to donate a life extends the hectic head-mounted shooting as the wonderfully old-school chiptunes attack like the invading beasties.

Part of *Bullethead*'s simple appeal is how straight it plays it: this is an unashamed love-letter to a mostly forgotten genre, about as addictive as the best and rendered in a cute, pixel-prominent style. It might induce repetitive strain in later levels, but *Bullethead* succeeds in its ambitions without setting off the vertical shooter landmine of monotony.

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Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

Is game dedication on the way out?

Screen Digest's Piers Harding-Rolls examines increased competition for dedicated gaming devices and services

The transition to digital distribution and online games services has brought with it much disruption to the entrenched and traditional games business. Alongside other developments in device and game user interface and lifestyle software – driven this generation mostly by Nintendo – increased broadband penetration and mobile internet have done the most to widen the audience for games content beyond its early confines and the enthusiast gamer. The addressable market for games companies now contains a large belt of mainstream new consumers or potential consumers, which different types of device and entertainment company are converging upon.

From the specialist end of the market, the dedicated games device companies have been successful in extending the relevance of their services and content to the wider mainstream audience, and they continue to stretch beyond the confines of the original console gamer opportunity. As mentioned, Nintendo has done this very successfully through the use of interesting and innovative user interfaces for its products and through the launch of lifestyle software which appeals to a wider and different gaming audience. Sony and Microsoft have taken an alternate route, targeting consumers on the fringe of games with different entertainment experiences and social networking features. These platform companies see the expansion of the market to this central and well-populated ground as a source of growth for their relatively mature businesses.

From the opposite non-specialist end of the

IPhone title *Angry Birds* is a deceptively simple-looking puzzle game that has hidden depths, perfect for luring non-gamers into playing something they might not have given a second glance on another system







www.screendigest.com



With ***Dragon Quest IX*** **on DS and** ***Peace Walker*** **on PSP, major gaming brands have made the transition to handheld platforms, bringing core games to those who may not buy into home console systems**



FarmVille **marches on, with variant** ***FrontierVille*** **capturing those bored with the basic pastoral experience**



market, the opportunity is defined by the non-dedicated games experience made possible by everyday usage of broadband and mobile internet enabling different platforms and devices. The ubiquity of the internet and its role as a distribution platform and the relatively open nature of a number of massmarket platforms such as the iPhone and Facebook have made self publishing far cheaper for many indie developers – hence the deluge of content that has arrived on these platforms. The efficient distribution and publishing model means that these platforms are now competing with dedicated games platforms in the mainstream consumer arena.

Not only has the internet enabled the distribution of games content and services, but non-specialist platforms and devices have found games to be superbly sticky, helping maintain incredibly high levels of activity across their users. This is helped a good deal by games' inherent flexibility and customisation, allowing different genres and types of content to be served to different segments of the market. This ability to customise the experience and to target consumers to this extent is unique in the entertainment sector.

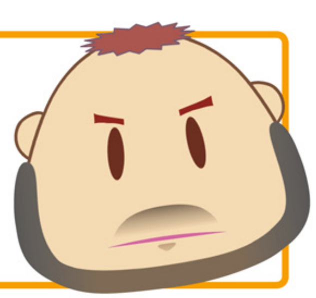
As ports of call for millions of consumers, the iPhone and Facebook are well positioned to intercept and capture new customers without specialist games platforms getting a look in

So, under this new online-enabled regime, we can already see that both forms of device and platform – those with a core dedication to games, primarily the consoles and handhelds but we could also lump online games portals or platforms in there as well, and those mainstream destinations and devices already mentioned above – are starting to compete more directly to attract the same audience. The big question is: which approach will win in this increasingly competitive area of the market? Perhaps it is better to ask a different question: is it easier to start in a more niche arena with gaming enthusiasts and expand outwards to capture more users through consumer education (and millions of pounds in marketing spend), or is it easier to start from a massmarket position with millions of users and pump in loads of games content to see what sticks? Recent trends suggest the latter. We have seen both iPhone and Facebook eat into established specialist games sectors – iPhones with handheld games and Facebook with PC casual game portals. And this success correlates to everyday active usage of these platforms and devices. As ports of call for millions of consumers on a daily basis, the iPhone and Facebook are well positioned to intercept and capture new customers without specialist games platforms getting a look in. If this trend continues, it is likely that dedicated games devices and platforms will become increasingly marginalised in serving the mass market.

SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Where have all the otaku gone?

Game producer Brick Bardo finds a rift in generations of pop-culture purveyors



This morning, I found a stag beetle on the stairs at the train station. When I was a kid, I often went with my friends to search for them in a forest nearby. It's a hobby that is very popular among boys, and these kinds of beetles are adored.

I told a friend in his 30s about it. He said he's never been to catch any. The only time he did collect insects was when he was in the countryside at his grandmother's house. But even then he didn't go catching them – he bought them in pet shops. This is when I felt our generation gap. We are both from outside Tokyo, with 15 years separating us. I'd like to talk about this gap from my perspective – that of an old otaku!

Recently, I gave a talk to students on a make-up course in a school focused on visualisation and effects. I went to talk about movies, of course. My work has nothing to do with make-up, but I always try to get interested in the things around me.

In their studies, they are shown classics from the likes of Hitchcock and Kurosawa, but their interest is elsewhere: they love zombie movies and know all about them. One student, a girl, expresses her frustration to the others when they are given some homework to do. Most of the students are going to reference Toy Story or Alice In Wonderland – not a monster or zombie. Her ambition is to be like Rick Baker, who recently worked on the movie Wolfman.

Rick Baker is a genius make-up artist and whatever he does is just incredible. His masterpieces are his work in Greystoke and Gorillas In The Mist. It is safe to say that those movies hinged on Baker's work. He rewrote many pages of the make-up artist rulebook. Take it from an otaku in his 40s (me!) who has a lifelong interest in these things: he's the best.

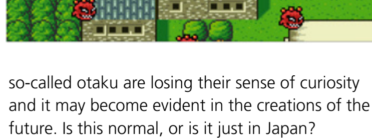
So I ask her: "You will have tried to replicate Rick Baker's simian work, right?" Big mistake. Her reply: "What are you talking about?"

Now, here I am with students who are in awe of someone's work and want to follow in his footsteps but don't know his history. In the last 15 years, I've seen lots of incidents like this.

Here's more. Super-fans of Anno Hideaki's Evangelion who know nothing of Love & Pop or Shiki-Jitsu. Blade Runner fans who have never read Phillip K Dick. Terry Gilliam fans who have never heard of Monty Python. And then there are those applying to videogame companies who have never even owned a videogame console… I can't stand that! People who want to work on RPGs but have never played a single *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest*.

Videogames are now old enough to have their own history. Dots can be connected from other worlds and types of media, but also between other games. Look at the effect cel-shading had after Jet Set Radio

Videogames are now old enough to have their own history. Dots can be connected from other worlds and types of media, but also between other games. Look at the effect cel-shading had after *Jet Set Radio* – even *Zelda* used it. Or how Square influenced the RPG. The danger is that young,



so-called otaku are losing their sense of curiosity and it may become evident in the creations of the future. Is this normal, or is it just in Japan?

Here is the way I see an otaku, or used to. An otaku is someone who has a deep knowledge that serves no single, obvious purpose. While the knowledge is narrow, it is linked to a variety of subjects that expand an overall cultural view.

Let's say you discovered Star Wars and really loved it, became a fan. You'd feel the need to play Namco's arcade game, *Star Fire*, and buy the Famicom version. You move on to THX-1138, American Graffiti. Then you feel the need to listen to more rock'n'roll classics. You may watch other movies like Flash Gordon, or even Hidden Fortress, which brings you to Kurosawa's Throne Of Blood. Which leads you to Shakespeare…

It's like that for an otaku: curiosity leads you. At least, that was the meaning of being otaku in my day. From my high-school years to my 30s all the otaku around me were just like that. That is why many of them have a very extensive knowledge of what could be described as a global subculture including movies, manga, games, novels, plastic models or toys. However, it is counterbalanced with a very weak knowledge of baseball players, girls, outdoor stuff and other such things that can't be included in, or connected by, their curiosity process.

So it's not all positive, but some of my generation's otaku have switched from consumers to creators and helped keep this subculture alive.

Because of our overloaded information age, is it too much effort to be curious now? Are the times changing? In the past, it was impossible to contact any creators. Today, with Twitter and blogs, you can lightheartedly contact anyone. In the past, stars had charisma that kept them on a god-like level, but today the fans are not necessarily even following the stars. There is not the same sense of curiosity any more.

Anyway, here we are now. We can't assume the current generation of otaku know it all. Most of the time you realise they don't. And you feel like an old person complaining about the lack of education. Don't get me started on trying to create something for people nowadays.

So, is it only true in Japan?



You don't need to find old hardware to absorb gaming history: *Final Fantasy IV* is one of several classic Square RPGs that are available today on DS, albeit with tweaks (above)

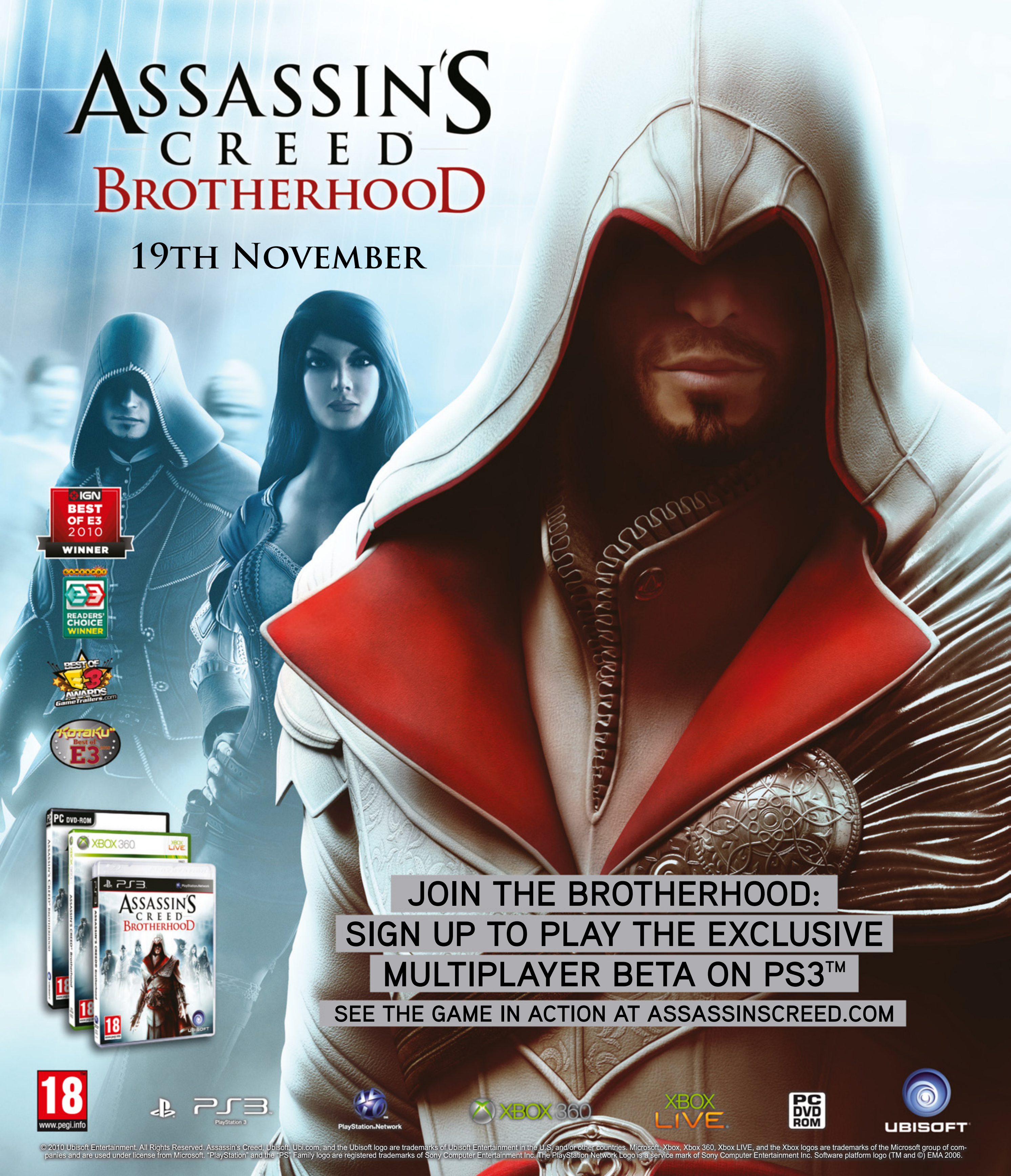




Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales, July 5-25

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***Wii Party*** (Nintendo, Wii): 424,359 (NE)
2. ***Shirokishi Monogatari: Hikari To Yami No Kakusei*** (Level-5, PS3): 217,144 (NE)
3. ***Inazuma Eleven 3 (Level-5, DS):*** 208,515 (670,892)
4. ***DQ Monster Battle Road Victory*** (Square Enix, Wii): 188,011 (NE)
5. ***Fire Emblem Shin Monshou No Nazo*** (Nintendo, DS): 184,333 (NE)
6. ***Powerful Pro Yakyu 2010*** (Konami, PS3): 152,049 (NE)
7. ***Bokujo Monogatari Futago No Mura*** (Marvelous, DS): 98,982 (NE)
8. ***Last Ranker*** (Capcom, PSP): 96,924 (NE)
9. ***Fate/EXTRA*** (Marvelous, PSP): 67,372 (NE)
10. ***Taiko No Tatsujin DS: Dororon!*** (BNG, DS): 65,533 (130,747)

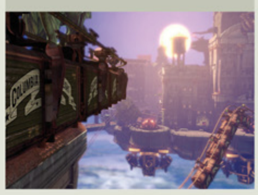

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Rapture's been forgotten as Irrational heads skyward. Electrocuting crazy zealots with lightning shooting from your hands, thankfully, hasn't.
360, PS3, PC, 2K GAMES

Deadly Premonition



A PAL release finally secured, it's time to find out what all the fuss is about. A Lynchian thriller in the *D/D2* mould or a so-bad-it's-good schlockfest? We'll soon find out.
360, RISING STAR GAMES

Orion: Prelude



Once a *Half-Life 2* mod, *Orion: Prelude*, with its mix of jetpacks, dinosaurs and the classic '90s deathmatch of *Tribes* and *Quake 2*, could trigger a retro renaissance.
360, PC, PS3, SPIRAL GAME STUDIOS

Your console needs YOU

Here's one we made earlier...



Uploading, sharing and improvising (as in *LBP2*, left) is becoming an increasingly important part of our gaming landscape, with many wannabe designers finding their way into the game industry through tools supplied by developers

What is it about DIY? Even if it's a hollow imitation of something manufactured to much higher standards, doing it yourself is always more rewarding. We customise our cars, we build our own PCs and now, thanks to *Dead Rising 2*, we can build our own zombie-maiming devices.

Personalising destruction is a common theme this month. *Halo: Reach*'s new, improved Forge editor offers up more potential for map-and-gametype creation than previous iterations, and everything from the shape of bases to the height of 'furniture' is tweakable.

But though *Dead Rising*'s DIY options add a little customisation to filleting undead flesh, it only fractionally affects the game. *Reach*'s Forge, and the likes of *Super Scribblenauts*' level editor, have a different goal: to let users dictate an environment (and ecosystem) for others.

These 'bonus' systems are a far cry from something like *LittleBigPlanet 2*, but they're certainly a form of game creation. *Dead Rising 2*'s weapon customisation is interesting more for the future it hints at than its reality. Taping sawblades to a plank is all well and good, but no one's under any illusions about creator freedom. At the same time, player personalisation is gradually being recognised as the key mechanic it is: *Dragon Quest IX*'s a fantastic RPG, but it wouldn't quite have the same legs if you weren't able to alchemise the kit to turn your warrior into a giant jellybean. *DR2* is the forerunner for a future in which more games include customisable tools throughout.

The only thing *Reach* is missing, and come release it may well not be, is a distribution mechanism – plenty of great *Halo 3* mods made a single appearance in the Bungie Favourites tab and disappeared, never to be seen again. *Reach*'s tools, wonderful as they are, are an incremental upgrade rather than the next step for Forge: that will happen when millions of *Halo* players are actually using these creations every day.

Forge's aim is to add longevity to *Halo: Reach* with developer-authored multiplayer tools; *LBP* is at the other extreme with its very identity bound up in its users and their creative abilities. But both are built on a symbiotic bond between developer and audience that only videogames can pioneer.

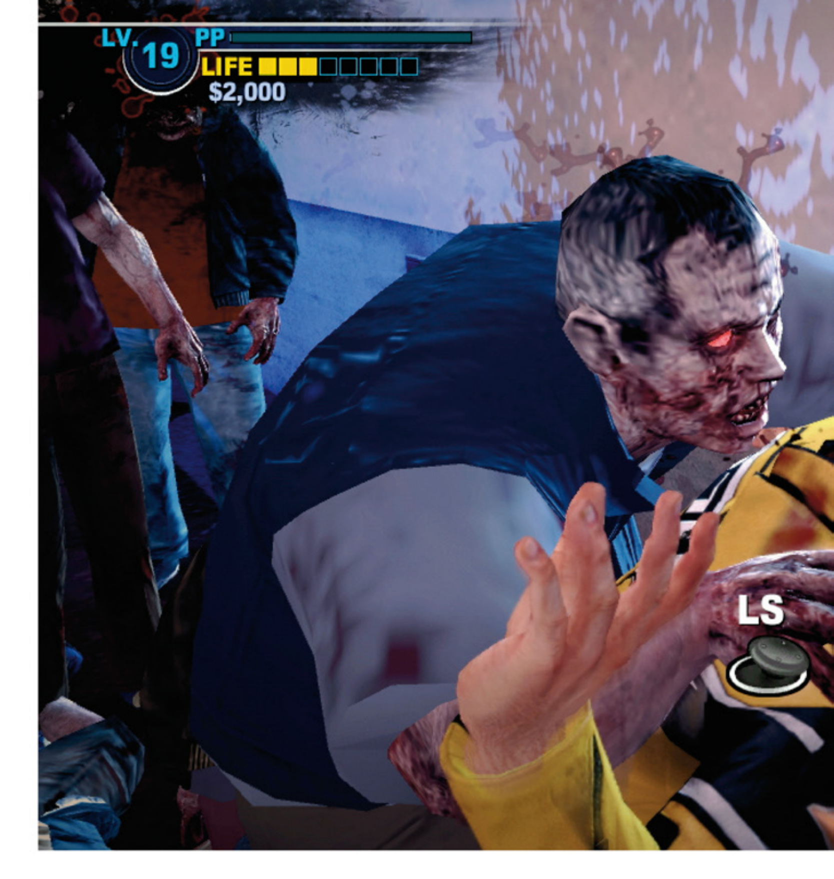
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **BLUE CASTLE GAMES**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E208, E209, E216**

Dead Rising 2

The best way to stem a tide of ravenous flesh eaters: get creative



Once again, we find ourselves unable to resist using masks to liven up the undeath of a few zombies along the way. It only buys them a few more minutes



Pity the zombie, for he knows not what *Dead Rising 2*'s morbidly creative developers will jam into his squishy body next. *Dead Rising* was a game about creating staccato memories, each zombie kill a chance to mentally capture a perfect (or particularly messy) offing. Its sequel – set five years later in a world where people are familiar with the mostly contained zombie – realises this in a heartbeat, and presents motocross rider and protagonist, Chuck Greene, with as wide an array of death-dealers as possible.

Simple decapitation is not enough, even with Blue Castle's updated dismemberment physics. Slam an axe through a limb and the resulting zombie will be notably lopsided; power through skulls with a sledgehammer and they'll burst, dropping your foe immediately. No, these deaths are too clean for a game that positively applauds from the sidelines as the player straps lethal implements together to create something double-lethal. This is a game in which combining a bucket and a cordless power drill yields a helmet as invented by Vlad the Impaler if he had access to power tools. Slam this onto a zombie's head and you're treated to a five-second animation, the walking corpse juddering and spasming as their bonce is penetrated by turbo-spinning points. And an Achievement.

Find a can of propane, stud it with nails, place the resulting IED near the crowd and pop it with a bullet. The explosion sprays gruesome debris

Killing in such inventive ways nets the player 'PP', the nebulous currency garnered by gruesome photography in the original. That game's camera is gone this time around, PP dished out instead for the use of cobbled-together weaponry, or successful deployment of items' heavy attacks – accessed via a longer press of the action button. More PP means higher levels. Levels in turn give access to a larger inventory, a longer health bar, and 'combo cards': advice on combining items to make the most successful zombie-pummelling devices. These start simple – nail plus bat equals a proto-mace – but get more convoluted later, their effects not always designed to kill as many zombies as possible. Stick a handful of fireworks in the mouth of a rubber lizard mask and slap it on a zombie and they'll light up like a decaying beacon, distracting local undead long enough for Greene to make an escape. Or long enough for Greene to find a can of propane, stud it with nails at a nearby workbench, place the resulting IED near the crowd and pop it with a bullet. The resulting explosion sprays gruesome debris and hands the player a chunk of PP. Talking of gruesome showers – find a showerhead and Greene can forcibly insert it into a zombie's forehead, brain goo and blood emptying from the open wound.

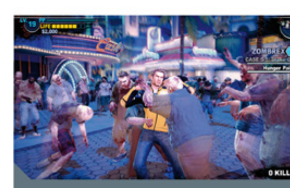
As you'd expect from the weaponry described, *Dead Rising 2* is clearly more in the comedy section of the video nasty store, jettisoning any real scares. Zombies begin as easily escaped mannequins, there to poke and prod and kill in exciting ways. Later, they turn more menacing, a pulsating version of



Wheelchairs can be an awful lot of fun if you use them to mow down zombies, and this one can be upgraded and customised at workbenches to make an unhinged killing machine unlike anything we've seen before



Throwing a pile of records in the first *Dead Rising* was an amusing but not particularly effective way of dishing out the damage. We don't see casino chips as being much better, but the low wall around the table seems to keep the basic brain-muncher at bay for long enough to try



Queen bee

Dead Rising 2's story mode retains certain constants from the zombie plague that beset Frank West in the previous game's Willamette Mall. Keep an eye out for zombies rooted to the spot – if they're waving their arms, they might be harbouring a queen: a hornet that, when squished, ruptures the craniums of nearby undead. In a game that's so happy to surround new boy Greene with shamblers, these queens are invaluable when you need to get somewhere fast. A number of favourite weapons also make reappearances – the *Code Zero* DLC calls you quickly into a bowling alley, replete with more bowling balls than entirely necessary, ideal for carving swathes through rotting knees; parasols, held at chest height, perform a similar path-clearing job.

the first game's midnight monsters, turned stronger by the darkness. Even then, Greene keeps pace with their increased strength, more powerful and insane weaponry upping the stakes on both sides of the divide between life and undeath. The plot echoes this silliness. Melodrama of the cheesiest calibre, it's pastiche instead of pathos. The 360-exclusive *Case Zero* DLC sets the game up, seeing Greene and daughter Katey get stranded in desert settlement Still Creek. Katey's facing imminent zombification – halted by 24-hour wonder drug Zombrex – but Greene's all out. Braving the infested streets, players have a set of missions, presented as in the full game, to procure Katey her semi-cure and get parts for a motorbike to escape the town.

We know Greene doesn't get far on those wheels – *Dead Rising 2* begins with man and daughter arriving in Las Vegas analogue Fortune City. Holed up in a safehouse in the Royal Flush Plaza, the player's first priority is again Zombrex for lil' Zombirella. From there, Greene meets survivors, leading them back to the safehouse for further discussion, and discovers he's been pegged as the catalyst for Fortune City's zombie outbreak.

Presented in similar terms to *Dead Rising*'s Willamette Mall, Fortune City is a set of interconnecting casinos, shops and open spaces, as jammed with zombies and the tools to murder them as you'd expect. It feels more like an extension of the first game than an entirely new environ, with looting opportunities aplenty, but at least the strip's casinos and hotels add something new.

Largely unchanged, too, are the save and mission systems. Recording your progress is still a matter of finding a nearby bathroom and relieving yourself; missions still stack up against a timeframe, serious organisation necessary to finish all chosen jobs before the clock runs down. This time around there seems to be greater emphasis on replay value: you're explicitly told the military will arrive in the city within three days, and Greene's given repeated chances to restart his game with the advanced character earned by a few aborted playthroughs. And 360 owners can import their *Case Zero* Greenes.

Dead Rising 2 is in many ways unchanged from its predecessor. That game split opinion like few others, some deriding its arbitrary bolt-on of a rigid, time-focused structure, others adoring the freeform violence tied to a story that didn't care if the player was left behind. In not pandering to cries from either side of the fence, *Dead Rising 2*'s developers have had the space to get innovative with the core of the game: the brutal and repeated evisceration of shambling corpses. There is no finer aim.



The chainsaw has been used to dispose of those unfortunate enough to become undead since *Doom*, and makes short work of humans. How you'll fare against a tiger, however, may be another matter

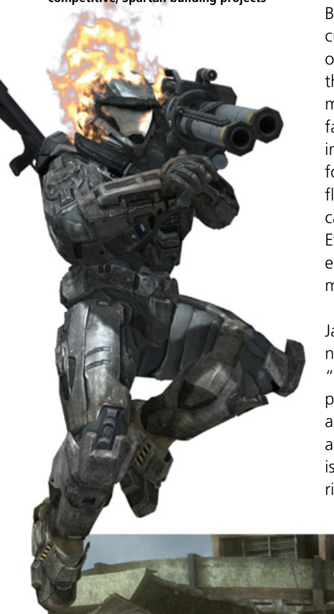
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER 14**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E211, E215, E217**

Halo: Reach

It's over to you as Bungie lifts the lid on its multiplayer mastery



Even with the increased size of the environments, Forge still caters to eight simultaneous builders. It'll hopefully encourage cooperative, not competitive, Spartan building projects



At the latest preview event for *Reach*, the focus is all on the trimmings. A sure sign that the title is gearing up for its impending launch, but also an insight into some of the lessons learned from a decade of FPS design.

First on the agenda is Forge mode. Community manager **Brian Jarrard** describes the fragility of the original Forge as like "building a stack of cards" – one false move and your creation falls to pieces. Bungie's answer is to offer more options for customisation than ever before. In the hands-off demonstration, boulders are ripped from the ground of the newly titled Haemorrhage map, which shares the exact proportions of fan-favourite Blood Gulch, and bases are intricately deconstructed and rearranged to form all manner of creations. You can now float objects in mid-air, removing the need to carefully stack materials to make platforms. Even better, you can now merge objects into each other. With 150 unique pieces of material promised, the potential is huge.

Having shown us some of the tools, Jarrard hops his Spartan into a Falcon – a new airborne troop carrier described as the "Warthog of the skies" with space for passengers and gunners – and takes us on a tour of the locale. It is an epic ride. Up and over the sniper's ridge of Haemorrhage is an entirely separate chunk of gameworld, ripe for population by wannabe designers.



One set-piece involves a group of civilians who have blockaded themselves in an outhouse, and whose pleading and confusion feels dynamic rather than cheaply contrived

There's a landmass steeped in a vast ocean and an empty hangar bay ready and waiting for use. This isn't a level designer – contours and general map templates are fixed – but it's as much freedom in Bungie's sandbox as you could hope for.

Then, the meat: hands-on time with the new, improved Firefight. The success and popularity of the mode clearly hasn't gone unnoticed at Bungie, and along with full matchmaking there is a range of new features that serve to flesh out the core concept. The most standout and hardcore variant on Firefight sees two users take on the role of Elites, camouflaging themselves among the waves of Covenant and gaining extra points for each Spartan corpse they make. It presents an unenviable task for the two Spartans, and cries out for less aggressive waves to even the playing field. Fortunately, the new Firefight has just the thing with its fully customisable options. Whether you want a second wave of Elite snipers, a fourth wave of Brutes or an armada of Grunts, it's yours for the choosing. In practice it means that hosts and game creators become the overlords of the experience, setting the pace and challenge for participants. In our particular game we choose to ease players in with two Grunt waves (plus confetti headshots, naturally), before bringing out the big guns with a pack of Brutes. Conversely, there's always the preset Gruntpocalypse – as the description says, you aim for the face.

It's in our Slayer games, however, that the armour specialisations really come into their own. The ability to change loadouts at respawn means that the pace and style of your game can change radically between lives. If a map is being flooded with Ghost-riding maniacs, select a shield-lock and wait for the fools to try a hit-and-run. In a multi-tiered level like The Cage, jetpacks can help you gain the upper hand. And if the Haemorrhage snipers are getting you down, why not send out a hologram of yourself running into the open, then flank campers

The rocket launcher is as big as ever, and the assault rifle and pistol feel like old friends. A new favourite for taking out Ghosts is a shield-lock before they try a hit-and-run



The new-look Covenant are just as cunning as you remember. Ramped up just to Heroic they're a worthy foe, but separate the Grunts from their gang and you can pick them off easily



The world of *Reach* is much denser, with vegetation and activity than any previous *Halo*. Indigenous creatures, charging wild alongside vehicles and running straight into your path, provide extra reason for caution



Points mean prizes

Bungie also took the time to outline a new Credits system, one that tracks all your Achievements – from headshots to lucky escapes – and rewards you for your efforts with the new currency. It's then on to the Armoury (also known as a shop) to unlock/purchase new kit for use across all game modes. We glimpsed a wealth of clobber, from Stormtrooper-inspired helmets to some scandalous shoulder pads, but it's all kept firmly in line with *Halo*'s visual tradition – the intention is that users will fully customise their Spartans. If it sounds too close to microtransactions for comfort, worry not: Jarrard says that such an element is "not something we even considered."

as they break cover? Holograms work similar wonders in Firefight, drawing Covenant attention and freeing you up for some sweet revenge. It makes games a hustle and flow of choices, as tactical as ever but more varied.

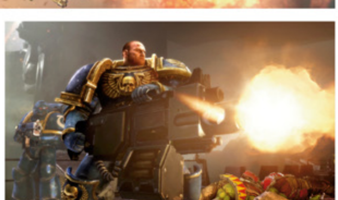
After numerous rounds of multiplayer conflict, it's time for a breather – and a Mongoose race. *Halo 3* veterans will recall the player-made 'Halo Karts' gametype, and it seems to have gained itself official recognition. With 16 racers, it's a push-and-shove battle around Haemorrhage to each checkpoint that's as intense as it is hilarious as we dodge landmines and crunch mudguards with the competition.

Since they've been lifted wholesale from the campaign, the Firefight maps also show the tone of *Reach*'s world. The suburban den of New Alexandra hints at a much more domestic, civilian environment, like New Mombasa in full daylight and with fresh décor. The team also gives a quick gameplay glimpse of the opening to the campaign, previewed in rough-cut form in **E**211 but now much more polished and presented entirely in-game. There are new flourishes of detail – wind turbines litter the background, vegetation is varied and nuanced, and one set-piece involves a group of civilians who have blockaded themselves in an outhouse, and whose pleading and confusion feels dynamic rather than cheaply contrived. Another pleasant jolt of reality comes when a flurry of indigenous creatures sprint out of a nearby passageway, galloping away from an unknown threat. It builds an atmosphere grounded in the real as much as the fantasy, one about a planet rather than a ring-world, and one that looks like a suitable requiem for a decade of quality.

Ringing ears are a regular occurrence thanks to some great audio design. Just remember to take cover – sticky grenades are as deadly as ever, every hit a guaranteed cremation







Throughout *Space Marine* your battle-hardened captain will level up, use of each new weapon contributing to your overall ability with it: your unlocks range from additional attachments for existing weapons to new colours. The weapon count runs to about 15, and you'll be able to customise your character, too

Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine

A model entry in the thirdperson shooter genre, forgoing strategy in favour of all-out waagh

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA**
DEVELOPER: **OBSIDIAN**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 16**

Making a thirdperson shooter featuring space marines isn't the most original design brief in the world, but when they're *the* Space Marines, Games Workshop's oft-imitated future humanoid army, it's different. Outside of Relic's *Dawn Of War* games and tribute extraordinaire *StarCraft*, the Warhammer 40,000 universe has never quite punched its videogaming weight, but perhaps a natural home for the grim darkness of the far-flung future is the mainstream shooter.

Space Marine is set on an Imperial Forge World: a planet that's a factory, churning out machines for a never-ending war. It's been overrun by millions of orks, and the Ultramarines have been sent in to bash them. There's plenty of other stuff going on – as soon as you land, you're seconded to an Inquisitor with a shady agenda involving super-weapons – but it's all just an excuse to get pumping the trigger.

The Warhammer 40,000 art style is a major asset: even the best thirdperson shooters tend towards brown, grey and muscly, but *Space Marine*'s from a different world. Its alpha males are bound in battered, scratched armour with ludicrous shoulder pads, their royal blue contrasting with the chittering mass of greenskins, everything overshadowed by colossal architecture or cramped into rippled corridors.

If anything's thirdperson nowadays it has to be compared to *Gears Of War*, but that doesn't really work for *Space Marine*. There's no cover mechanic, for a start, and enemies are much more numerous: gretchin (little chaps) and orks pour from every direction, massing into crowds that somehow push through your withering bolter fire. The lack of hiding places along with the sheer mass of enemies give *Space Marine* a very different rhythm from the usual thirdperson shooter – an intense, trigger-clenching march forward.

Conversely, enemies *can* take cover. It doesn't make much difference. Your hefty marine can sprint straight for them and smash through everything in the way, sending cover and bemused orks flying. This is all happening in the midst of chaos, with both sides taking and returning huge amounts of fire, with plenty of neat effects – visuals blurring while sprinting and, when a grenade explodes too close, the audio cutting off sharply before fading back in.

The demonstration ends with a set-piece, a spectacular on-rails gun section that places you in an assault ship – part of a huge fleet that's assaulted by Stormboyz, orks with rocket packs. It's loud, explosive and varied, your position on the ship changing throughout the barrage before the inevitable crashlanding, and certainly bodes well for pace-breaking interludes.

Space Marine may be another shooter, but it's packed with carnage brought about by non-stop firing. Orks pour out of vents, jump down from above, out of holes in the walls, charging ahead in massive numbers. Then there's the kind of little touch that makes *Space Marine*: corpses, literally hundreds of them, don't disappear until you've left the area. You might want to stomp on them, after all. There's a gun in here so powerful that it turns packed ranks into reddish mist. Not a subtle game, or one that's likely to drive much chin-stroking, then. Just one full of bad guys and guns, without a six-sided die in sight.



Are we fighting only orks? Bethesda's response to our question is: "We're only talking about orks". So we can dream of the chance to take out a hive of Tyranids



Da fist

A major theme for *Space Marine*, we're told, is making melee combat work. First impressions suggest that this is more of a visual aim: picking up an ork, your marine merrily slices it in half with a chainsword in a second, its component pieces flying about as messily as you'd expect. Other impacts are crunching and gore-heavy, while there are combos, simple knockbacks and finishers woven in to the system. The depth is not in evidence here: melee looks good, but also seems like it doesn't require much more than button mashing when close to an enemy.



If there's a problem with BioWare's starship plan, it's that it (paradoxically) aids the feeling that players lack 'ownership' of their character, since those who dream of piloting a fighter or other single-seater ship have to make do

BioWare's big announcement at E3 was that every player would get their own starship, doing the same job as *Mass Effect*'s Normandy: a place for NPC companions to hang out and to keep trophies and items

Star Wars: The Old Republic

Will MMOG players accept heroes with their own thoughts and feelings?

Whatever its missteps with the prequels, few could argue that a major part of Star Wars' success is that despite its science-fiction setting there is someone to identify with – or aspire to – for everyone. From naïve farmboys through sarcastic grafters to spoilt princesses, you can find your own hero to root for. And with videogaming's most obvious appeal being that you get to be the hero, it's no surprise that singleplayer Star Wars offerings have been largely successful.

But the MMOG is an entirely different experience. With thousands of players at the same time, even the most popular games tend to crush the sensation of personal heroism in the face of group effort to beat larger and larger monsters. They replace that sensation with the feeling of complete personal agency: the hero is you. Without a personal story arc and with nothing to say, an MMOG hero expresses its player via the colour of your armour or choice of mount.

This is what makes BioWare's take on the Star Wars mythos in the context of an MMOG so fascinatingly alien, despite the debt the basic design owes to the *WOW* template. Given the chance to play the game with others, we dived into the low-level content for a female Twi'lek smuggler, and from the first NPC the difference was apparent. While NPCs act like the quest-givers of any other MMOG, interacting with them through voiced cutscenes is jarring, and it's quickly apparent that class reflects characterisation rather than a distinction such as tank or healer. Our smuggler's dialogue options allowed only a sarcastic selection of Han Solo-alike quips, making it obvious – just as BioWare argues in *Mass Effect* – that despite the customisation on offer the hero is not a player surrogate.



When NPC discussions are performed with a group, players have to gather in the vicinity of the NPC for the dialogue to begin, but can exert some influence over the progression of a quest: at each prompt, everyone in the group chooses their own desired response (via their own dialogue wheel) and via some behind-the-scenes calculations one player will 'win'. However, with quests currently specific to individual players (there is no open group content), participants can feel like they're just tagging along on someone else's story. The idea of forcing another's quest in a different direction through a mischievous response adds some spice (and griefing worries) but the thought of potentially playing a quest that made up your story with someone else as the hero is far less thrilling.

Indeed, it's this awkward pressure – the idea of living through an individual story in an MMOG space – that defines *The Old Republic* at this still early stage of development. The draw of an MMOG (that the hero is you) is missing, as is the draw of a BioWare RPG (that the world is yours alone to shape). The combination, however, holds an alluring potential to be more than the sum of its (missing) parts.

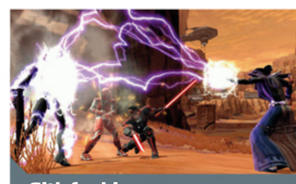


Newly announced races are the Zabrak, Sith Purebloods, Mirialans and Miraluka. The latter – blind humanoids using the Force to see – are the most interesting



The cover mechanic, while still tied to the keyboard, is part of BioWare's intention that the game will be easily played solo, adding defensive options for ranged players

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **US/CANADA**
RELEASE: **2011**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E196, E204, E210,**



Sith for hire

***The Old Republic*'s *WOW*-eque mission design makes sense when you're a hero, but what about when you're a villain? Taking some extra time to play through some Sith Inquisitor content, it's genuinely odd in a game so strongly themed to find your deeply evil (if low-level) Sith running fetch-quests and killing bugs to please superiors. With treachery and power-grabbing at the heart of the Sith, BioWare is going to have to weave clever stories to make players feel growth without being able to stab their quest-givers in the back.**



There are plenty of multiplayer options, with a pass-the-pad mode encouraging you to form and break alliances with your friends. Online games can be saved, too







The restriction to five moves per turn means you can turn the tide of a battle against a large army with a small number of units by being conservative and playing well

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **HAUNTED TEMPLE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2011**

Skulls Of The Shogun

A spot of necromancy sees turn-based strategy awaken to vigorous new life on Xbox Live Arcade

After so many years consigned to special-interest murk, turn-based strategy is re-emerging in an energetic and appealingly colourful new form. Developers such as Mode 7 and Capybara Games are promoting a snappy kind of strategy in breezy short-form battles. Haunted Temple Studios is soon to join them, addressing the subgenre with its upcoming XBLA release, *Skulls Of The Shogun*.

"It's a great genre, but it's sort of stalled, I think," says the four-man studio's founder, **Jake Kazdal** – a veteran designer, artist and animator who has worked on such auspicious titles as *Rez*, *Space Channel 5* and Steven Spielberg's canned LMNO project. "The mechanics haven't updated in a long time. Lately it's become this tiny niche genre and I'd really like to blow that open."

Skulls Of The Shogun takes apart the *Advance Wars* formula and reassembles it in a format fit for the arcade. Aside from its '60s-anime-inspired style (see 'Eye for the samurai'), what strikes you first is that there isn't a grid. As you control your army of undead samurai, freedom is unrestricted, removing some of the chess-like rigidity for which the genre is known. Instead of moving a number of squares, the distance each samurai can travel is indicated by a circle around him. He can move, attack, and then move again – the circle having contracted to indicate the distance possible with his remaining movement points.

"I'm trying to simplify as much as possible," says Kazdal. "I want a lot of strategic depth without having 50 different units; we've only got a handful, but they're all balanced and work very differently. This guy's a scout – he can move farther than anybody. He's got an average attack and average defence but he's really good at flanking and stealing people's resources. This is the infantry – he's the brawler, the frontline guy. He's got a strong defence, and once he starts powering up he's tough to take down. His counterpart is the archer who's very lightweight and weak – he won't even hit back in hand-to-hand combat, but he's got a huge range of attack and that attack is very powerful."

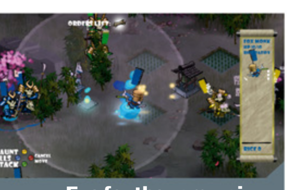
Then there's the shogun himself – both your super-weapon and Achilles' heel. A shogun's death means game over, but he's also your greatest martial asset, creating a risk/reward balance that *Skulls* exacerbates by enabling him to increase his hit points with every turn in which he isn't deployed in battle. There are other neat twists: you're capped at five moves per turn, which ups the pace and ensures that even armies of mismatched sizes are kept on an even footing. Enemies don't merely expire, either, but leave their decapitated skulls to be collected – grisly power-ups that, when consumed in number, can transform units into war demons. But there's a risk there, too – allow a well-endowed unit to be overwhelmed, and you'll effectively gift all those skulls to your opponent.

Kazdal's art has a concise style of communication: rice paddies visibly deplete as their resources are acquired; health is indicated by the colour fill on the flag protruding from the back of each samurai; captured (or haunted, to use the game's vernacular) areas are marked with floating coloured fireballs. The offbeat setting of supernatural Japanese feudalism should serve to turn heads, and with its prudent pruning and refinement of the genre's mechanics, *Skulls* may well rouse turn-based strategy from its torpor.





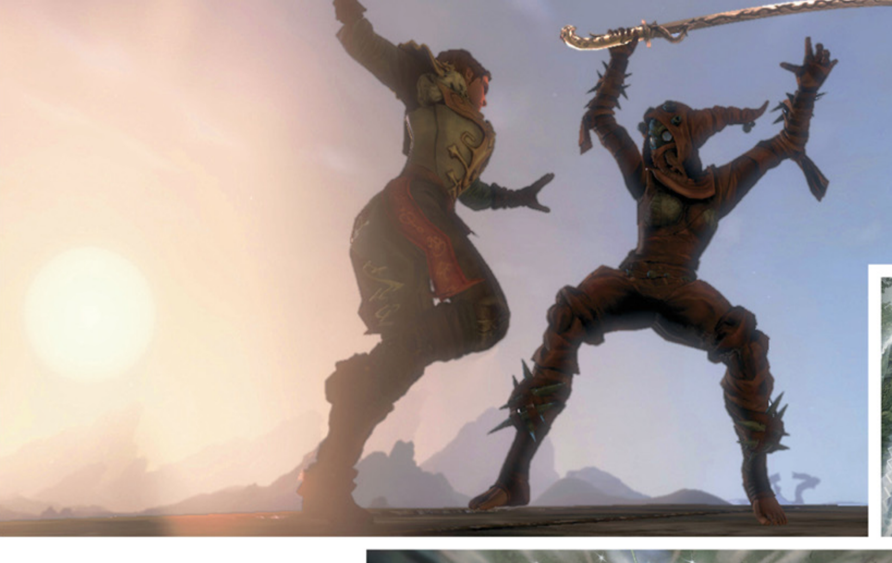
The game's levels, and some of its units, are themed around the different seasons. "In the fall we have a crow monk," says Kazdal. "He can use the power of the wind to disrupt things. He can blow out the enemies' fireballs and move skulls"



Eye for the samurai

"I lived in Japan for a long time and had a bunch of weird ghost experiences," says Kazdal. "Haunted temples and scary stuff like that. I really wanted to explore that in this game, so I left my hardcore sci-fi concept art behind and moved back to the stuff I was into as an animator. The aesthetics are based on anime from the '60s. I'm a huge fan of that stuff, before it became all about giant robots and big hair. It was classic storytelling with simple, sharp, stylised characters. A lot of them were shown in black-and-white, so they worked hard to communicate stuff."

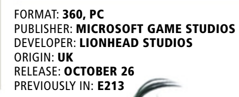




While Lionhead is making moves to ensure *Fable III* is accessible, it's pretty clear that this effort isn't going to translate into any reduction of the game's spectacle or scale

Fable III

Lionhead orders off-menu, but is it forgetting a little flavour?



FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **LIONHEAD STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 26**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E213**

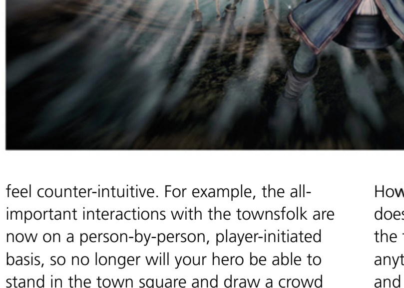
Lionhead's *Fable II* was the very definition of a flawed masterpiece – one so flawed that it still causes arguments in the **Edge** offices over whether or not it really is a masterpiece – but it's interesting to note that what impressed one player was as likely to annoy another. There were those who hated the attempts to make it accessible, such as the much-derided breadcrumb trail, but just as many who struggled with its complexities, such as the nested lists that made up its menus.

But, as they say, you can't please all of the people all of the time, and perhaps it's a little bit of mischief on Peter Molyneux's part that *Fable III*'s tale of hero-turned-ruler will challenge the player to attempt exactly that (or, for those of a darker persuasion, successfully please themselves at everyone else's expense all of the time… without paying for it). The changes made for *Fable III* promise to make it even more divisive than its predecessor, and perhaps most likely to upset those who loved *Fable II* exactly the way it was. By putting increasing accessibility at the very top of its aims, some decisions feel counter-intuitive. For example, the all-important interactions with the townsfolk are now on a person-by-person, player-initiated basis, so no longer will your hero be able to stand in the town square and draw a crowd of admirers – running out of the pub and their homes – simply by repeatedly guffing and belching. It's a little disappointing.

The much-talked-about no-menu system doesn't always quite live up to its promise, either, at least not during our demo session. Shops may not offer a 'menu', but you do flick through their wares one by one in a way that feels pretty much like using a menu. However, the Sanctuary – the 'main' menu – does genuinely work, instantly appearing at the flick of the Start button (faster, if anything, than *Fable II*'s traditional menu), and dashing into the clothing room to adjust your wardrobe is a much quicker way to get your look right than the alternative. The rooms do seem to have limited space, which makes us question if the more clothes you get, the more are hidden in what is ultimately just another kind of menu. Sadly, in our demo the door to the trophy room is locked, meaning we aren't able to get a peek in to see if Achievements come with some in-game silverware, which would give a little more value than just the little shiver we get when we hear the unlock noise.

The Sanctuary's main benefit is that it's immediately understandable and instantly usable by any player who already has a grasp of how to control the hero and interact with the world. As the game ramps up in complexity – the player will be setting taxes while juggling quests – the Sanctuary's ease of use and full 3D kingdom map should stop the game dipping in to spreadsheet territory, but we're looking forward to finding that out for sure.





The industrial revolution that has taken place since the events of *Fable II* means that you'll notice more advanced technology spreading across Albion, giving the world a distinctly evolved look



Call a locksmith

Quite a few things have changed about *Fable III*'s combat system, and again it's in a way that feels a little counter-intuitive to veterans. Melee and ranged combat still have their own buttons for switching between them fluidly, but the 'lock-on' target selection system has gone in favour of some behind-the-scenes threat targeting and the removal of the HUD. Unfortunately, our playing style – a constantly dodging pistolier – means we rarely manage to actually shoot anyone we want to, leaving us pining for a return to having more control.





The returning Advanced Mode challenges you to pass the same level three times with three different exploits

Super Scribblenauts

Crazy, creepy and cool? There's an adjective for that

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **WARNER BROS**
DEVELOPER: **5TH CELL**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 29**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E215**

As outlined in **E**215, the big additions in *Super Scribblenauts* – besides a D-pad controllable Maxwell – are adjectives. Like your dinosaurs smelly? Angry? Flirty? Pointless as many of the possibilities may be, it's still a thrill hitting on a golden combo – like our triumphant mesh of 'creepy' and 'man' into Jason Voorhees. Playing through the first selection of *Super Scribblenauts*' levels, the flow of the game is already a much smoother, prettier ride than the first time out.

The opening stages of the first world are stationary affairs, which suits *Scribblenauts*' pause-for-thought nature far more than anything ambitious like platforming. Figuring out how to repair a broken-down car, what creature shares characteristics with both giraffe and dinosaur, and – our favourite – getting an alcohol-free beach party started by any means necessary all require neural activity rather than the dextrous demands of the original.

The Create-a-tron is a welcome addition to *Scribblenauts*' library of invention. Making a Frankenstein's monster or a werewolf by dropping in the right pieces will demand different lines of thought, and it's good to see the machine has been given its own spotlight outside of the main game in the level editor. There's still no massive avenue for bending the dictionary with hybrid concoctions in our preview build (anyone else itching to see a man-bat?) but that's perhaps a cheap shot at a game that's potentially as educational as it is entertaining. And, admittedly, crocoducks and fire tornados have at least been promised.

You'll be forgiven for spending your first few hours, if not days, messing around in one of nine 'Playgrounds' on *Super Scribblenauts*' frontend. These miniature scenes, mostly made up of domestic, urban environments, are the most fertile ground for your vocabulary. Though they seem uninspired themselves, that's *Scribblenauts*' raison d'être – transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary with the power of language. The line *Scribblenauts* treads is one that, if crossed, would land us back in the days of text adventure games. Part of the appeal is how it harks back to the brainpower and the choice-is-yours gameplay of titles such as *Henrietta's Book Of Spells*. The difference here is that there's no narrative drive. In relying on your own imagination, the designers haven't resorted to any invention of their own, which can leave the journey a little characterless. The adjective level we encounter at the end of the first world does throw up a few laughs with its resurrection challenge – youngest to oldest before a coffin releases your reward – and suggests more playful charm to come.

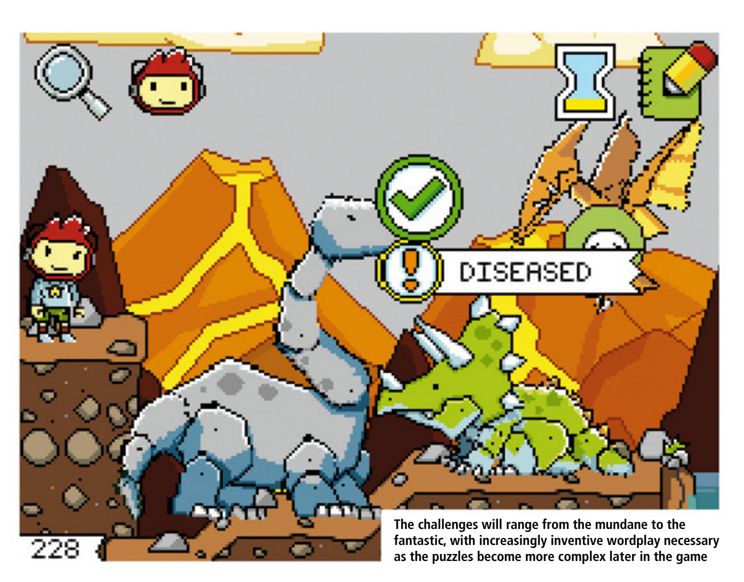
As the title suggests, this isn't just a sequel, but an enhancement. The hurdles that tripped players up first time around have been removed to allow the genius of the *Scribblenauts* concept to breathe with less restriction. As a tool for experimentation and education, it remains original, fun and brain-teasing.





Reach for the Starites

As before, Starites are the objectives of *Super Scribblenauts*' levels. They're the key to progressing through the constellation worlds, and your gateway to earning some Ollars. Using a word for the first time will also gain you some of the precious commodity, and they're your pass to new avatars and in-game hints. The tasks required to unlock your Starite are many and varied, from equipping an army for war (we ended up with a Village People ensemble of warrior, police officer and soldier, with a little George Washington for good measure) to ensuring a witch's love potion works wonders on the ghastly beast roaming nearby.



The challenges will range from the mundane to the fantastic, with increasingly inventive wordplay necessary as the puzzles become more complex later in the game

Pac-Man Battle Royale

Thirty years after his debut, the hungry dot is back in the arcade

FORMAT: **COIN-OP**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Toru Iwatani's sublime reworking of his original *Pac-Man* design into a thrilling five-minute time attack with *Pac-Man Championship Edition* was an astonishingly insightful reinvention, keeping everything that was important to the land of Pac while creating something entirely new and relevant. You have to wonder if attempting to reinterpret such a streamlined design into a fourplayer multiplayer coin-op extravaganza would be a step too far.

We can report quite happily, however, that Iwatani's core *Championship Edition* design stands up to potentially disastrous tweaking as well as his original. Four Pac-Men face off on the *Championship Edition* boards, with the aim this time not a high score but being the first to collect the power pills which, rather than simply offering the ability to eat ghosts, grow Pac-Man to twice his size, allowing him to devour his opponents. The game is a tense – rather than, as perhaps Namco might have hoped, joyful – face-off as players struggle to get to power pills first or, failing that, eat the mazes' pellets to spawn the fruit that will refresh the maze with more pills (all while avoiding their opponents and the ghosts, dangerously easy to overlook).

Championship Edition veterans will be right at home, and across five fast-paced rounds (over in five to ten minutes) it's a fun if disquietingly serious competition to see who will win. If there's a problem it's that, devoid of wider score-based competition – or currently any reason to play with less than the full quartet – the experience begins to feel a bit hollow for all its intensity. But still, *Pac-Man Battle Royale* seems certain to be worth the odd punt with pals.







Likely to be a fixture in the few remaining arcades and the odd bar, *Pac-Man Battle Royale* is a great way to celebrate the yellow blob's 30th birthday



Donkey Kong Country Returns

Donkey Kong returns, but it's really like he's never been away

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **RETRO STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **WINTER**

Though it's been eight years since Rare was acquired by Microsoft, fans who hold a candle for the studio's 16bit and 64bit era must have watched aghast during E3 as Nintendo not only announced an Activision-published 'reimagining' of *GoldenEye*, but a new *Donkey Kong Country* too.

Rare redefined Donkey Kong even within Nintendo's canon, and it's perhaps due to that kind of history that the publisher has entrusted the new title to Retro Studios, of *Metroid Prime* fame.

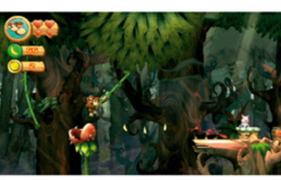
However, Retro took such a successfully different direction with Samus that its straightforward 2.5D update of *Donkey Kong Country* seems positively milquetoast. The 'returns' is a more honest addition to the title than 'new' was to *New Super Mario Bros*, since bar the graphical update there's really little to note for those familiar with the original, with all the mine-cart riding, barrel blasting and vine swinging you could expect. It even controls exactly as you remember, the only nod to motion controls being the requirement that you shake the Wii Remote in order to perform Kong's ground-pound.

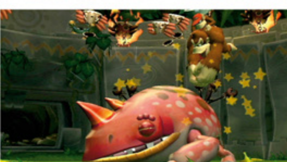
The one major addition – that of simultaneous multiplayer, with the second player controlling Diddy Kong, jetpack and peanut guns in tow – doesn't seem to add enough to replace the sense of déjà vu (and, like *New Super Mario Bros Wii*'s bubbles, dead players float on the screen in barrels).

Unfortunately, stripped of the revelation of prerendered 3D that accompanied its SNES release in 1994, *Donkey Kong Country*'s design has never threatened the best *Mario* games, so Retro Studios is going to have to show some of the magic that made *Metroid Prime* so essential for this return not to be unwelcome.

It's testament to Rare that the game's simple style and simian stars continue to get attention. The difficulty of later levels, however, is something we wouldn't miss







Though nothing as revolutionary as the translation from 2D to 3D in *Metroid Prime*, *Donkey Kong Country Returns* may yet have some surprises up its sleeve

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **HIGH VOLTAGE SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Conduit 2

High Voltage conducts itself well and shows obvious improvements

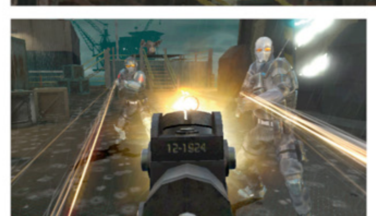
The Quantum3 engine handles reflection and bump-mapping effects without breaking a sweat, making *Conduit 2* one of the more visually sparkly Wii games

The Conduit can most charitably described as a 'nice try' at creating an FPS to please the hardcore crowd on Nintendo's hardware, but having sold well for a thirdparty title on the small but mighty Wii, High Voltage Software is back for another shot, having dropped a 'The' in the process.

With setting, visuals and level design at the heart of *The Conduit*'s problems, High Voltage has gone back to the drawing board, with the team, able to reuse the first game's Quantum3 graphic engine, concentrating on a unified art direction and offering a wider range of environments for levels. It begins on an oil rig above Atlantis and journeys through the US, Siberia, the Amazon and China.

While the game does directly continue the story of *The Conduit* – as generic Secret Service agent Michael Ford, the player battles a secret alien invasion that aims to control humanity – the brighter graphics and more interesting locations make the game somehow feel more like a spiritual sequel to *Perfect Dark*, something only bolstered by a more interesting range of weapons and gadgets than we've seen in a while, such as the very *Perfect Dark* Phase Rifle (capable of firing through walls) and the District 9-inspired Vortex Blaster, which gathers up the bullets unleashed by opponents before firing them back.





The Leviathan (top) is a guardian of Atlantis that attacks the oil rig as a boss encounter, tearing the structure apart with our hero on it. As fortune would have it, there is a series of gun turrets positioned around the rig with which to blast away at the beast's glowing weak points. Not all of your targets throughout the game are organic, however (right)

Of course, it would all be moot if the levels remained an unappealing trip through repetitious corridors. High Voltage has promised more potential for the player to mix things up, with alternate routes available through each level and the ability to flip tables over or otherwise use the environment for cover, and indeed our demo trip across the oil rig proves a pleasingly varied one.

Conduit 2 may prove, even in the face of success, that developers might be able to learn from their mistakes. Wii players starved of shooters – even those burned by *The Conduit* – should watch this one closely.

Comic Jumper: The Adventures Of Captain Smiley

Twisted Pixel twists paper and ink for a side-scrolling comic book adventure

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **TWISTED PIXEL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2010**

XBLA has received some stick recently as a 'slaughterhouse' for indies, but at least one independent developer, Twisted Pixel, has found it fits just right, being able to produce two top-selling original IP titles – *The Maw* and *'Splosion Man* – each with their own individual design and anarchic sense of humour.



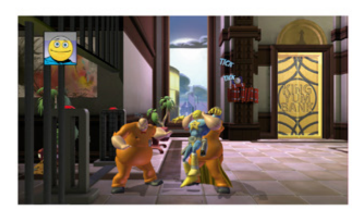


Captain Smiley leaps from panel to panel, showing off some bright, colourful artwork. The story sees the captain and his gruff sidekick take on the egos of the bad guys

The developer's third title, *Comic Jumper*, continues this individualistic tradition, with comic-book-styled Captain Smiley leaping from the pages of Twisted Pixel's chief creative officer Josh Bear's seventh-grade school workbooks.

Captain Smiley runs through four 'issues' and 12 levels, each split up into distinct comic book BIFF-THWACK melee and BOOM-POW twin-stick shooting that – perhaps surprisingly – seems to draw from Treasure's side-scrolling playbook, with a consistent stream of enemies and an intensity to the attacks that keeps the player moving from set-piece to set-piece.

Most interesting, however, has to be how distinct each issue of Captain Smiley's adventure is, drawing from a broad spectrum of American comic book history, from a Frank Frazetta-style barbarian comic Nanoc The Obliviator to our personal favourite, Improbably Paper Pals, which features an absolutely pitch-perfect Jack Kirby art style, space-age robots and ill-advised sidekicks such as the Origami Kid and Paper Lad. If there is a worry, it's that, like *Deathspank*, the sense of humour (largely led by Smiley's sarcastic talking chest-piece, Star) will become wearing across a heavily scripted game.



You spend most of your time pummelling away at the competition, with successful combos resulting in your foe being launched into either the fore- or background. Conversely, you might just end up on the receiving end

But with *The Maw* and *'Splosion Man* Twisted Pixel created games that, while largely one-note, found a receptive audience on Xbox Live Arcade, and the studio knows its fans. *Comic Jumper* doesn't struggle too hard to reinvent that wheel, instead promising to offer a solid experience for followers of comic books and the company's previous titles alike.

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PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM



Vanquish is full-throttle slow-motion wall-jumping robot-shooting with a potty mouth. We visit Platinum Games to play the game and catch up with its well-spoken producer, Atsushi Inaba

A game tester's chair typically has several previous owners, and is always found among others of its kind. In an average studio it's typically joined by a half-decent TV and maybe a pair of headphones. At the office of Platinum Games, the testers' chairs are different. As well-engineered as Sam Gideon, the hero of the studio's latest project, *Vanquish*, they face high-end flatscreen displays, surrounded by full 5.1 audio systems. It may seem like a little detail, but details are important when you want your next game to sell millions.

Platinum Games bears expectations that come from its founders' pedigrees, whether that's Hideki Kamiya and Shinji Mikami's separate reigns on *Resident Evil*, or the blooming of Clover with *Okami*, *Viewtiful Joe* and *God Hand*. The studio is now four years old, about to release its fourth game (the last to be published by Sega under the companies' current deal), and the past year has seen it deliver a 10 that we didn't quite see coming in the form of *Bayonetta*, along with *Infinite Space*, a DS game of serious depth that rarely leaves the cartridge slot.

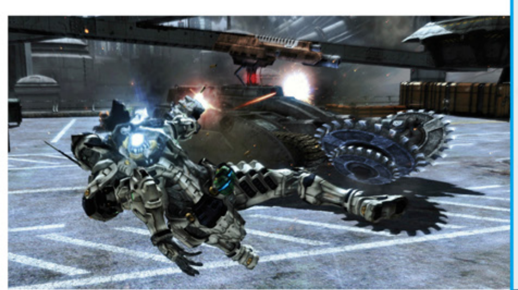
Platinum is no ordinary developer, and impossible to pigeonhole. Let's return to those seats for a moment. The swish setup might suggest a studio obsessed with optimal playing conditions, yet you can change the size of *Vanquish*'s

TITLE: **VANQUISH**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **PLATINUM GAMES**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 22**

subtitles to better suit SDTVs. There's that lineup of star development names – and then there's the studio itself, where **Atsushi Inaba** and Hideki Kamiya sit among all the other employees at boringly normal desks. Platinum will make a fathoms-deep game like *Bayonetta*, and put in a casual mode so everyone can see the best bits. It's a creative philosophy that clearly works, and any egos here are extraordinarily well hidden.

Masterminding all of that is executive director and producer Inaba. Involved in games as diverse as *Phoenix Wright* and *Steel Battalion*, and a key figure in Clover's titles, he's a stirring mix of ambition, common sense and idealism. Inaba's manner is usually aloof, but today he's a genial host (we suspect industry events don't suit his temperament) ready to enthuse at length about *Vanquish*, and its place in the context of a major issue for Japanese developers: Japanese players.

"It's right to think we made this game for the west," says Inaba, "but not like *MadWorld*." An early testing ground for Platinum's talents, *MadWorld* was a Wii-exclusive brawler with stunning looks but repetitive battling – and duly took home a 6 in **E**201. "With that we just forgot about the Japanese market altogether to focus on the west. With *Vanquish* we didn't forget about Japan – it's still somewhere in our mind, even if the game looks very much overseas-oriented." But the seesaw is definitely lower on one side. "If you give too much importance to the Japanese market there is a strong chance then the game won't appeal to the west. So the choice is clear. We focus on overseas for the obvious reason, while not necessarily forgetting about Japan."



"We've made this game for the west, but not like MadWorld. With that game we just forgot about the Japanese market altogether"

That's practical: the shooting genre has simply never had the appeal in Japan that it holds in the west. "It's due to what I see as a negative trend. Japanese gamers did not feel the need in the past to buy imports and play them. In sharp contrast, overseas users imported a lot. I think overseas users and developers have for a long time had a wider and more complete view of gaming. Shooters remained minor in Japan. Yoge ['foreign game'] quickly came to equal shooting games. At the same time, Yoge equals difficult, which means shooters equals Yoge equals 'too difficult for me'. And to be honest, very few people know about *Gears Of War* or *Mass Effect* or even *Call Of Duty* in Japan." Part of that is a lack of familiarity with, or appetite for, western settings (such as a 'realistic' modern war), and Inaba goes on to list reams of characteristics that qualify *Vanquish*'s scenario to address this problem: to paraphrase, it's because he's a lone hero with a cool robot suit. A more interesting quality, and one shared with *Bayonetta*, is an insistence that anyone be able to play the game without worrying about being good at it. "The action side is very strong, it's not just a pure shooter, and casual automatic mode makes the game experience very accessible if need be. If we can combine the right visuals and the right setting, we know we can achieve something in Japan. People look at the game and feel it is cool and fun, and want to try it. If they like what they play, they may want to try other shooters. I'd love *Vanquish* to be that trigger."

A disarming frankness about commercial hopes is the hallmark of Inaba's responses. And, with a track record of exceptionally good games that weren't hits, like *Okami*, you can understand why. Back in Platinum's earliest days when it came up with its first game concepts, "every idea back then we had overseas in mind." Their respective performances tally neatly with Inaba's perception of their role for Platinum: "In the early days, *MadWorld* was the most challenging title for us. Our DS title [*Infinite Space*] was really made for the Japanese market. And *Bayonetta* was designed to become our flagship title, to show our knowhow." Perhaps that's hindsight giving form to thematically disparate games, but underneath the confidence Inaba clearly has in Platinum's work, you feel the worries of an accountant. Discussing the first event at which the Japanese public got their hands on *Vanquish*, he admits: "You're never sure, so I looked on the internet to get any feedback possible – it was only then I was relieved because most comments were quite positive."

Co-founder Shinji Mikami has been the focus for *Vanquish* hype, but he's not around today – perhaps interviewing for his new studio, Tango. Elsewhere on these pages Inaba discusses Mikami's talents as a director, and when playing *Vanquish* that gift for revitalising familiar mechanics is obvious. It feels wrong to pigeonhole the game as a thirdperson shooter, which of course it is, because that doesn't suggest the sheer verve of its new mechanics. Where the rhythm of the typical genre piece is drawn-out cover battles punctuated by moving forwards, the battlefields of *Vanquish* are more dynamic arenas. There's always something to catch your eye – a lone ally fending off too many attackers, pieces of the scenery exploding from impact, vehicles crashing into the fray – and the whole point



INABA ON MIKAMI AND KAMIYA

Atsushi Inaba (above) discusses the differences between working with *Devil May Cry* director Hideki Kamiya and *Resident Evil* creator Shinji Mikami

"Kamiya-san is very much driven by the vision he has of something. He'll have this one idea which could be just a visual effect. He will work toward achieving that vision whatever the cost, the time or the resources involved. He knows perfectly what he wants, and has it very clear in his mind. Since these visions are often about a visual element, it is hard to directly translate them into a game. That is certainly the most challenging aspect of his work, I think. In *Bayonetta*'s case, we'd already decided it would be an action game, so it may have been easier with that.

"Mikami-san is very disciplined in his work. He knows how to stick to the initial idea, concept or design. He will try various things along the way, and take on many challenges, but in the end the core of the game is exactly what he decided to do at the start. His game design is very structured, solid. But he is no standard director. He has a lot of experience, which includes being producer and director of an entire department back in the days at Capcom, so he knows every aspect attached to development and management. He can't be like Kamiya-san, moving toward a clear objective whatever the cost. So he struggles between what he wants to do and what reality can offer him.

"So both are two very different creators and directors, but both are really talented. I think that this difference is clearly visible in their respective creations."





One of *Vanquish*'s distinctive qualities is the slick feel of the technology that permeates its gameworld, from Gideon's battle suit to the environments he skims and thrashes around







Our time with the *Vanquish* demo sees us tackle some sizeable mechanical foes, but Platinum's concept art suggests that the action will scale up to ridiculous degrees later on

of boosting is that Sam Gideon can be there in a motion-blurred second. As two armies face off, you're the hi-tech joker in the pack, with a suit that can manipulate time, distance, and damage. This is a solo smashing mission.

It's also got a secret right hook: high scores. Mikami plays down the significance of the onscreen combo tally, but having spent considerable time with demo code it feels like a very big deal indeed. A carry-over from *Resident Evil 4*'s Mercenaries mode, with a more detailed on-the-fly breakdown akin to *The Club*, your score and multipliers are front and centre in *Vanquish* – taking up a good bit of screen real estate during the action, and summed up after each major encounter in the level. It encourages a showboating mindset, so when the normal thing to do would be duck and cover, you're going to be boosting across 100 metres to dropkick a cyborg just to hold on to your 9X multiplier.

The numbers work because they're so linked to the suit, and the power gauge that limits its abilities. If it runs out, Gideon's vulnerable and relatively powerless for about seven seconds, but what you get can be maximised by zipping in and out of the abilities and 'normal' play. At first we're using slow-motion for long periods, lining up headshots on multiple robots during these moments, but quickly realise that boosting behind enemy cover, rolling and popping

"*Vanquish* has a lot of Casshern spirit inside it," says Inaba. "Casshern is basically a superhero accompanied by a dog. Mikami tried the dog, but it brought nothing to the mix"

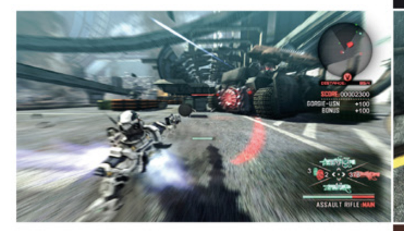
"We are really fortunate – Sega give us huge creative freedom. If we're given this freedom, we can make games that others can't"

up with a shotgun in slow-motion for an instant, before returning to 'normal' mode while Gideon gets the next shot ready, is more effective. It's an on-off switch that needs constant flicking, linking a tool with the hammer blow at the end. There are a lot of things ingrained in the mind of experienced shooter players – and let's not forget that, with *Resident Evil 4*'s camera, Mikami more or less invented them. *Vanquish* forces play out of that comfort zone as often as it can, and the score layer keeps it there.

Not everything's as delirious as straight-up combat. An escort mission slows everything down halfway through the first level – you guard an APC moving down a dark tunnel, as car-sized suicide jellyfish try to embrace it and explode. It's perhaps a necessary change of pace, equipping you with piercing weapons that encourage methodical shots, and in the case of *Vanquish* it's a slowly moving battlefield rather than another breakneck episode of slow-motion shotgun posing. It also lets the more gadgety weapons shine – a multi-lock laser launcher that demolishes infantry, a pulse rifle that ploughs energy balls through multiple targets, and a good old-fashioned rocket launcher that we fire while somersaulting off a wall.

Lack of co-op has been a talking point, but our time with *Vanquish* shows this just wouldn't make sense – the game is all about Gideon's abilities being unique. Inaba characterises such comments as "the 'WTF!?' reaction," suggesting a certain familiarity with internet feedback, and retorts that *Vanquish* is "a specific recipe. There's no way we could keep the same intense experience with an online mode. With co-op, it's more relaxing – you keep the enemy at bay, and because you're at a certain distance you can be lax about certain things like the accuracy of your hits. *Vanquish* is about close combat. It's intense, you can't hide much, and it fires at you from everywhere. Playing the game, people understand why there's no co-op mode. I'm glad about that, and I think we were right to make the game like this."

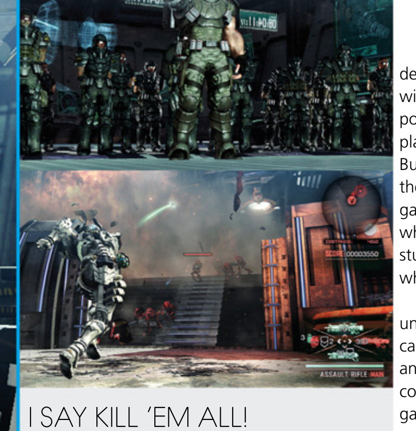
The only hesitation we have about *Vanquish* is that all Platinum has shown so far is the first level. That means some sections are over-familiar before release, and you do wonder what other kinds of enemies are in store – though we're convinced that upgrading your weapons to ridiculous











I SAY KILL 'EM ALL!

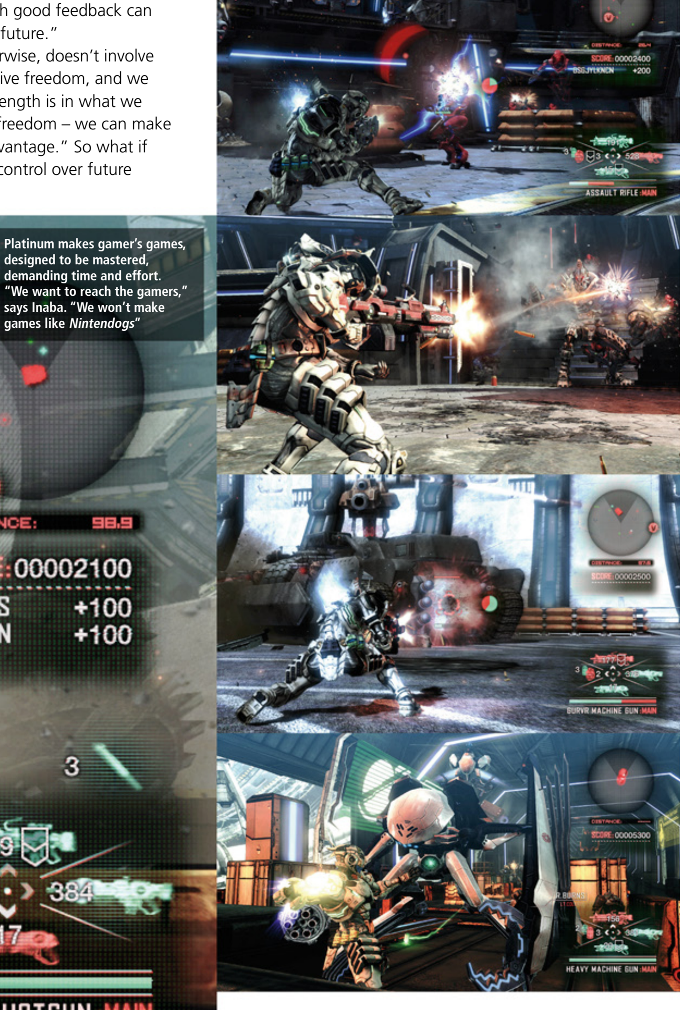
Gideon's yanked through showdown after showdown with a minimum of downtime. An apparent penchant for cutscenes looks worrying, but isn't too bad: barring a visual whopper of a CGI opener, they're snappy and the in-game dialogue's a witty and profane, if not profound, take on the genre. "That's Kato Hiroki's doing!" says Inaba with obvious pride. "He's a key member of Platinum Games and has a long story – yes, that's the word – with Mikami. They've worked together for some time. He was the director and writer of *Biohazard Code: Veronica* and wrote the scenario for *God Hand* as well. He is good at it – we knew he would be the perfect man for the job, and without hesitation so did Mikami." Fans of dialogue about detachable right hands, rejoice. We'll conclude with an exchange concerning teleportation tech: Gideon: "When we did try it out we had a rat that literally had its head shoved up its ass." Burns: "Figures that's the best you could do."

degrees plays a big part. We're certainly no more impressed with the giant mech that's the first big set-piece: he's got weak points, it's a long fight, and though there are different ways to play it, the combat just isn't as fun as the 'normal' sections. But let us also add, in mitigation, that this is the mid-boss of the first level – and the bosses only get better in Mikami's games. We later play a face-off with Gideon's Russian rival, who happens to have his own robot suit, and it's much better stuff, demanding careful husbandry of that power gauge while tempting you with opportunities to use it.

Vanquish is the fourth and final game to be published under Platinum's current arrangement with Sega. The report card is mixed. While *MadWorld*'s retail performance wasn't anything to write home about, *Bayonetta* sold over a million copies, and Platinum has definitely delivered quality original games, as was presumably its remit. With hindsight, Inaba wouldn't change a thing. "Even having a working time machine, I wouldn't have done things differently. We made three original titles and I believe we were praised for each of them. I'm not speaking about commercial success, but the core value of the gaming experience we delivered: *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish* are our big titles. The chances of a new company succeeding with original titles is quite slim, both commercially and from a creative perspective, so the fact that the titles we delivered got so much good feedback can be seen as a very positive seed for our future."

And that future, with Sega or otherwise, doesn't involve compromise. "Sega give us huge creative freedom, and we are really fortunate about that. Our strength is in what we can deliver if we're given this creative freedom – we can make games that others can't. This is our advantage." So what if sales mean Sega tries to exert greater control over future titles? "If we can't be guaranteed that freedom, then the partnership won't be able to continue. So we currently have a great partner in Sega, because they understand this need."

And is *Vanquish* an original experience? That depends who's playing. It can be merely a fresh take on familiar elements, with a fun boost move and the occasional bit of *Max Payne* thrown in. But it can also be a deadly score attack, an arena shooter with arcade rules and a central mechanic that changes the genre rather than just being bolted on to it. "[Mikami] worked hard to ensure his game wasn't a simple shooter, while trying not to go so far that shooter fans would start to hate the game," says Inaba. His game? "*Vanquish* is intended to be Mikami's challenge. We want the game to be the expression of his talent as a game creator." In an increasingly multiplayer and online genre, it's certainly not afraid to be different: Platinum's oft-repeated line that people have to play *Vanquish* for themselves should be taken seriously. It's not what's gone before. We'll need to wait for a review to see if Mikami's lived up to his challenge, but going on past form we'll hazard this: book a few days off. *Vanquish* could be a keeper.

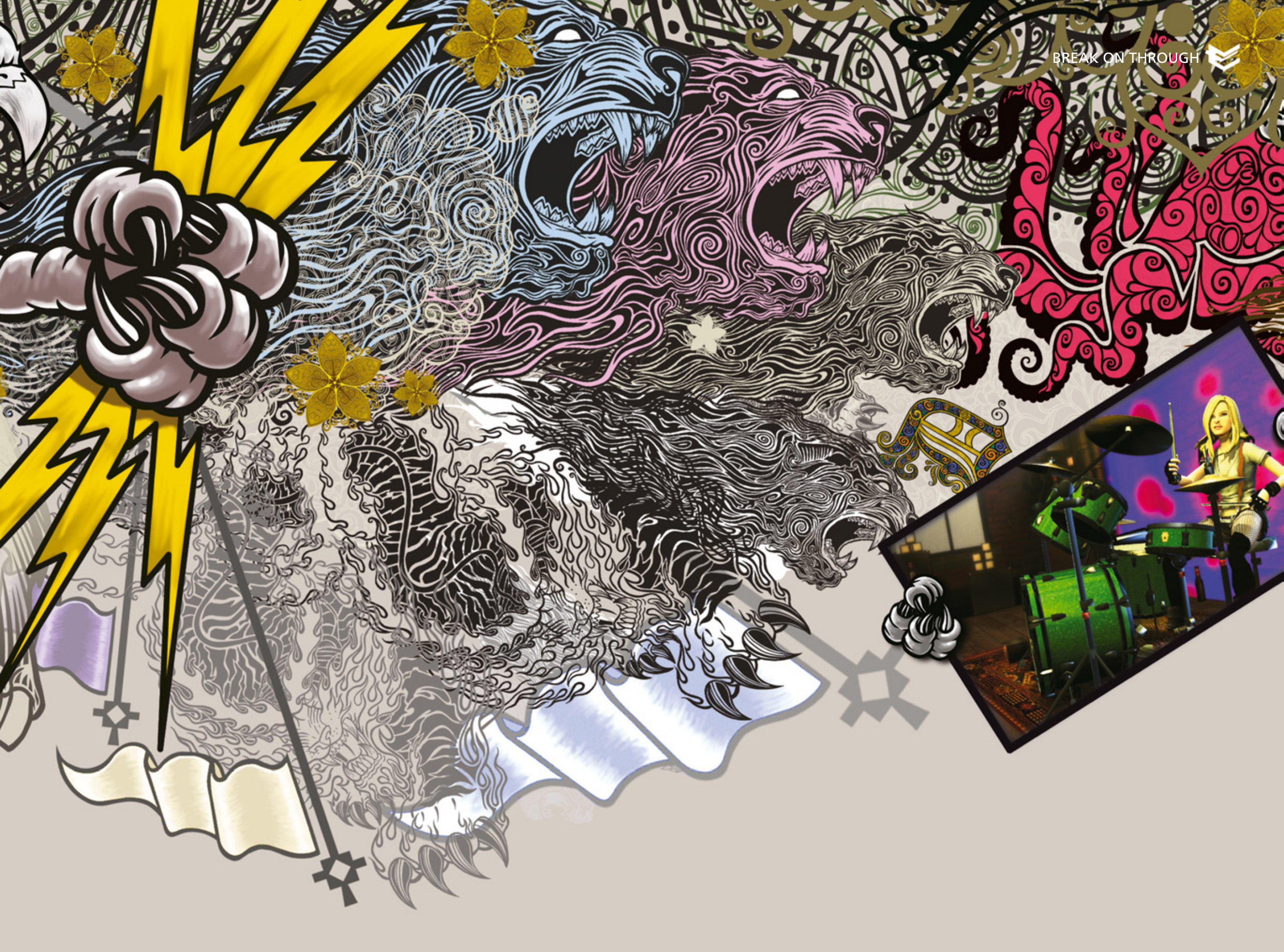


Platinum makes gamer's games, designed to be mastered, demanding time and effort. "We want to reach the gamers," says Inaba. "We won't make games like *Nintendogs*"

BREAK ON THROUGH

Welcome to the other side of the music game, says Harmonix, as it opens the doors of a genre-smashing Rock Band


TITLE: **ROCK BAND 3**
FORMAT: **360, DS, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **MTV GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX MUSIC SYSTEMS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 29**



If you follow the path of Harmonix over the last ten years, through the music games that all but complete its discography, the arrival at *Rock Band 3* seems obvious. Beginning in a dark, hypnotic tunnel full of shadowy electronica, it's a journey towards reality. *Frequency* becomes *Amplitude*, the tunnel becomes a wave, and the music a more Earthly landscape of sounds and performers. Then *Guitar Hero*, a mock-rock-doc with a highway of notes and a toy guitar. Then drums, microphone and *Rock Band*, the Don't Look Back to *Guitar Hero*'s This Is Spinal Tap.

You have to wonder: how did we not see the Pro Guitar coming?

Perhaps because a real guitar, or even a close facsimile, would require 102 buttons for one hand and six accurately tuned strings for the other, making Coleco's infamous Super Action Controller look like a lightswitch in comparison. Perhaps because, with our homes already resembling the boot of a big plastic tour bus, the idea of even more peripherals – more *expense* – was simply beyond reckoning. Or perhaps we just underestimated the drive of the company which did, after all, sell us those instruments in the first place. Perhaps, by extension, we underestimated ourselves.

For a certain type of *Rock Band* player, the arrival of Pro controllers – real instruments, more or less – will feel more like a gift than an expense. We mastered the fifth note to get closer to the music – now we can reach out and touch it. Together with added toms and cymbals and a 'pitch-accurate' two-octave (C3 to C5) keyboard, the launch of *Rock Band 3* will add the Squier Mustang Pro Guitar, a full simulation of strings, 17 frets and a hyper-sensitive strum area. Moreover, both it and the keyboard are fully functioning MIDI controllers. Gamers and musicians will, at last, speak the same language, learn the same skills and play the same music. They will, in ways to strike the cynical Jack White dumb, simply become the same.

Right, Harmonix?

"Well, we're not trying to turn people into Joe Satriani with this stuff," cautions project director **Daniel Sussman**. "We see Pro as a different experience from the five-button simulation, but not necessarily a track to expertise. We had a debate about whether or not to even include an Expert Pro mode because we didn't want it framing the whole experience. We have it in there because it shows the potential ceiling of where this can take you. But we certainly don't expect that many people to do four- or five-star songs on Expert Pro Guitar."

We've heard talk like this from Harmonix before, the words of a company whose every step is a leap of faith. Clearly, the Pro Guitar is designed to bridge the gap between videogame and actual musicianship – but that's a long bridge.



Three-part vocals bring the player count to seven. Drop-in, drop-out – as in *GH5*'s party mode – means anyone can go on stage at any time

How the average player, still struggling to master Expert mode, will adapt is very much unknown, and it's to the studio's delight that we eventually clear the tutorial. We know this, at least: every step of the process feels like the most meaningful tutorial we've ever been made to undertake.

"We talk about that all the time," says Sussman. "The return of investment. We've seen players get really, really good at the guitar game. That's great – I'm glad people are having fun and I'd never want to knock that. On the other hand, there's nothing you can take away from it outside the console world. The Pro stuff can open doors." It's still entertainment, he insists, not edutainment. Just as Easy Drums involve 'kick, snare, kick, snare', Easy Pro Guitar will be 'middle C, middle C'. "But the idea is that, if you put the time in, you can sit down at a piano or with an acoustic guitar and the return of investment is huge, because you're learning things which are legitimately musical."

It's around this time, sat in the 'Star Chamber' (demo room) of Harmonix's Boston studio, that we're introduced to two frightening things. The first is the ultimate Pro guitar model, which sounds like it'll launch sometime after the game itself, meaning something of a dilemma for cash-strapped early adopters. The Squier Stratocaster hybrid controller, which as the name suggests is a collaboration between Squier parent Fender and Harmonix, is a guitar. Note the lack of inverted commas. While its outputs, components and internal organs are built with *Rock Band* in mind, it stops being a 'controller' the moment you plug it into an amp.

The second thing is Bryn Bennett, Pro Mode developer and lead guitarist of local band Bang Camaro. He's not frightening, really, he's a very lovely man – but he does play a mean guitar. Preparing for E3, though, he did not know how to play The Power Of Love by Huey Lewis And The News or the murderous Rainbow In The Dark by Dio. He does now, thanks entirely to *Rock Band 3*.

To demonstrate, he blitzes the former on Expert Pro Guitar. The Pro interface is entirely new, instantly terrifying, but easily deciphered once you've run through the many tutorials. The button lane highway now depicts six strings rather than five lanes, numbers above the cascading notes telling you where on the fretboard your finger needs to be. Individual notes, in other words, rather than the usual entry point for the campfire noise polluter: strummed chords. Along the top of the screen, a no-frills image of the fretboard leaves you in no doubt of where your fingers are, even when your addled brain leaves you in no fit state to use them.

The Pro interface is entirely new, instantly terrifying, but easily deciphered once you've run through the many tutorials

For sure, it's a different, more serious mentality that's needed to make any kind of headway in Pro. The return on your investment should indeed be huge, but then so is the investment itself. Terms like 'difficulty level' sound contrived and sympathetic. This is music. It's different.

Bennett turns from the screen and carries on playing from memory. Then one of his colleagues yanks out the guitar lead and still the music plays, albeit an acoustic version from the guitar's authentic strings. "Don't knock The News, man," advises studio communications manager **John Drake**, who like most of its staff has a music career to boot. "These guys play some really good jazz chords." Plugged back in, which in *RB3* creates a note-free 'safe zone' so you don't lose your multiplier, there's a sweet little moment

A successful strum lights up the entire lane in Pro Guitar. What you can't see in the shot below is additional guide for the HUD: a glowing line that 'wraps' across the notes, forming the rough shape of your fingers on the fretboard



BE QUICK OR BE DEAD

"We don't need no education," will chant a considerable portion of the *Rock Band* audience for all kinds of valid reasons, from money or time to a simple lack of interest in Pro. To the rescue come the game's new Road Challenges, one-to-five-hour mini campaigns designed to be completed within a single session, available to all the game's instruments. Once the likes of '80s Rock Challenge, Indie Rock Challenge and Metal Challenge are completed, the stats feed in to your persistent career and drive you toward over 700 goals, Trophies and Achievements. Challenges feature variant game modes like Streakmania, Overdrive Chain and In The Spotlight, which score higher than the usual five stars.



Daniel Sussman, project director



Ryan Lesser, art director



Bryn Bennett, Pro mode developer



Matthew Nordhaus, senior producer



John Drake, communications manager

as Bennett ducks back into the menus. "The back button," he mutters, "now where's that?"

"Expert Pro is… It takes some work," says Sussman. "Not to mince words, it's hard. It's a big jump from Hard, which is a big jump from Medium, which is a moderate jump from Easy. It'll make for great YouTube fodder, though – that one kid who can actually 100 per cent Crazy Train on Expert. And it flips the tables on the leaderboards and who owns them where, certainly out of the gate, it'll be musicians. People will get into Pro because they'll see it as a way to learn more songs."

We were no less interested in the remedial powers of Pro Keys, which brings into play the dinky yet accurate keyboard controller. The keys themselves are full size, there's a miniature side grip for a distortion slider and star power button, and while this may be a prototype, the build quality is high. After all, music geeks, it does feature a 'non-weighted, velocity-sensitive key bed'. Familiar markers pick out certain keys for the simpler, more traditional Keys mode. And, yes, you can attach a shoulder strap, the discovery of which is greeted with no small degree of shame. As in real music, the 'keytar' just seems to have happened without anyone's approval.

Obvious flagship track Bohemian Rhapsody seems a good place to start, which on Easy Pro Keys is stripped to its bare essentials. The HUD this time accurately portrays an octave, little of which is used at such a low level. There are no chords or octave changes. Stepping up a level, it emerges that showing both octaves on screen would, unsurprisingly, be unfeasible, and so large arrow indicators warn you of an approaching octave change. The keyboard then slides to cover the relevant notes, the controller divided into colour-coded segments so you always know which ones are in play.

Whichever Expert Pro mode you choose, the notation's a 1:1 match. "We never have you playing something the band didn't play," declares Drake. Given that few pros can actually play tracks perfectly on stage, this does raise the very serious question of just how accurate the Pro guitars are. The fretboard of the more basic Mustang Pro is actually a smorgasbord of tiny buttons with separate, rather chunky 'strings' for the strum area. It's sensitive – oversensitive at first, a heavy strum causing other strings to register – but then that's the guitar. Much the same goes for the Squier, begging the question of how accurately anyone could sustain multipliers and truly ace the Expert tracks.

Pro mode will naturally come to distinguish *RB3*, especially as *Guitar Hero 6* heads into a more conventional story-based direction. "Our story's actually fairly abstract – you know, it's basically the rise to fame where you start as a small band taking the subway to your shows, and then over the course of the game you get your van, then you go on tour and get your bus," says Sussman. "It's punctuated by all these scenes that show moments throughout your history, but it's not explicit. It's not like: 'And then we got ripped off, and then aliens came down and did this thing'. There's motion but it's more about context."

But to simply call *RB3* a vehicle for real instruments is a massive understatement. As we explore the game's feature-set via its dramatically improved HUD, which Harmonix now calls its 'overshell', there isn't a single area that hasn't been overhauled. With 2,000 tracks predicted for the *Rock Band* store when it launches in October – our debug unit alone has 1,047 available, including imports from the previous *Rock Band*s and *Lego Rock Band* – the track filtering system has exploded into categories like genre, decade, number of vocal parts, keyboard support and song length. 'Neverending epic songs' is one category, 'Family friendly' another.

The character customisation mode is barely recognisable, precise features of face and body now shaped by analogue sliders. The game's shaders have been rewritten to provide more realistic surfaces, though the art direction itself is still deliberately stylised. Proof of that comes fairly swiftly in the form of one custom character, a sassy chanteuse with a python curled around her torso, its tail apparently vanishing into her unspeakables. And because the overshell sits quietly at the bottom of the entire frontend, players can set their myriad options without disturbing others.

This 'pure metagame' part of *RB3*



Keyboardists haven't been short-changed by their onscreen personae. The stage performance framerate was a deliberate 24 in *Rock Band 1* (the same speed as film), but has since risen to a less conspicuous 30

MUSIC IS MY RADAR

Assuming you're online, at no point during the *RB3* experience will you be wondering how your friends are doing, or indeed what they're playing. Career achievements, high scores and setlists will be constantly piped to Facebook, Twitter and the game's own news ticker, with comprehensive options for what gets posted and when. Setlist Battles can be drafted on RockBand.com and seamlessly imported, ready to welcome invited friends.

The octave shift in Pro Keys brings to mind near-subliminal lane changes in *Frequency*, but *Rock Band 3* eventually teaches you to forget about the controller

looks brilliant, what with it being a giant, evolving canvas for both user creativity and Harmonix's overwhelming love of music. We should probably mention that the studio's lobby also happens to be a giant library of books, games and DVDs almost entirely music-orientated, part perk and part, you suspect, homework. Kylie tour footage sits just down the shelf from the music videos of Mark Romanek, and there's a heartwarming lack of prejudice towards the studio's estranged offspring – every *Guitar Hero* game's here too, not to mention its DJ siblings.

This indiscriminate pairing of today's technology with music through the ages does, though, highlight the peculiar culture clash that's come to separate *Rock Band* from Activision's games. Such is the near absence of videogames elsewhere in the studio – or indeed the usual desktop Comic-Con junk – that you have to see this not just as a library, but a buffer of sorts, keeping all these cold modern toys from the world Harmonix is trying to keep alive, a world of giant, naïve rock and all the mythical happenstance within it.

"There's something really charming and huge about '60s and '70s rock," beams art director **Ryan Lesser**, who in his spare time likes to make silkscreen posters for gigs because, as with the consoles he develops for, he loves going wild with limited raw materials. "The big shows – a giant Zeppelin show or a Who show – when lighting and fireworks started weaving their way in: they were just so young and raw. It was: here's the band on a field of black, doing their thing and going crazy. And that's very real to us.

"If you show someone using a computer or an iPhone in a game about rock and roll, it's contradictory. And Jesus, if we had an iPhone when I was on tour it'd have made our life easier in every sort of way. But there's something cool about having to find a payphone, call the club to make sure you're still on the bill. Those are the things we try to put in."

It must be difficult, though, keeping it real amid such unrelenting progress, especially when your colleagues are the ones pushing the envelope. Just a short walk from Lesser's desk sits senior producer **Matthew Nordhaus**, who together with Drake in his previous role built the user-generated-content monster that is Rock Band Network. Since it launched on March 4 this year, this portal for original music has added almost 500 tracks to the *Rock Band* catalogue, already available to players of *Rock Band 2*. A true democracy where Creed and Sunny Day Real Estate sit side by side with the community's own material, it's currently locked in the dungeon of the second game's UI, plotting its escape in the third.

"One of the things that's great about *Rock Band 3* is that the store is all integrated, so the RBN songs will be sitting alongside all the other DLC," says Nordhaus. "And what often happens is that some artists have them in both. So instead of seeing two tracks you're suddenly going to see 11, or you'll be browsing through a genre that you like, like death metal, and go: 'Wow, there's like 52 songs in here I never saw before'. To the end user it'll be completely transparent, and because the quality's on par they're not going to care."

The standards for RBN submissions are as strict as the tools are professional. This isn't some pared-down, joypad-driven sequencer, but a facility for real musicians, via a free PC tool called Reaper, to add *Rock Band* notation to their tunes and tap directly into a global market.

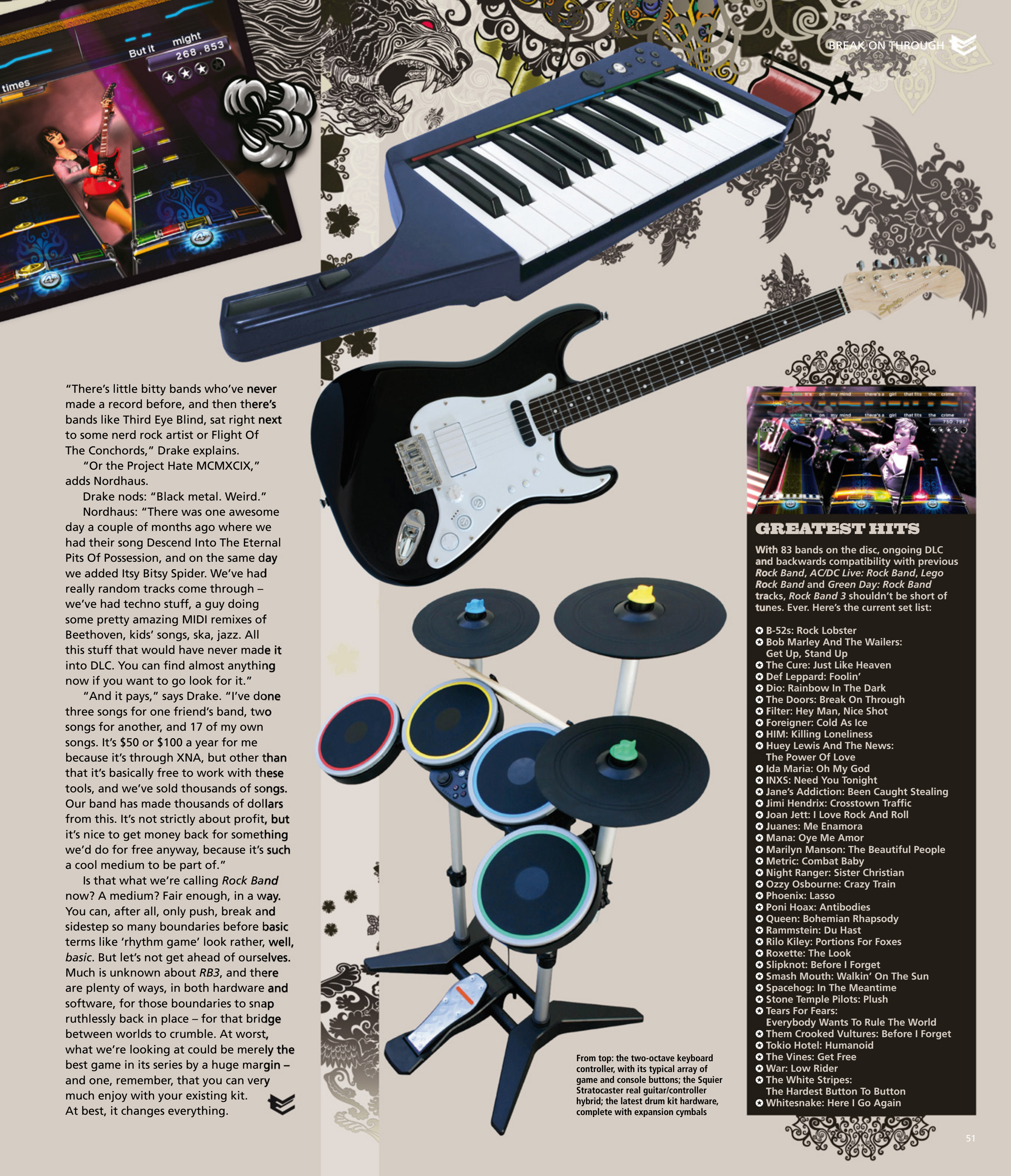
What we're looking at could be merely the best game in its series by a huge margin – and one you can enjoy with existing kit

COME TOGETHER

Maximising the potential of these costly *Rock Band* instruments is crucial. As well as its own Pro and traditional button tap modes, the keyboard controller can handle non-Pro guitar and bass parts, just as the guitars can handle non-Pro keyboard. A MIDI adapter box by Mad Catz, which is also supplying the Mustang Pro guitar, should allow the use of standard MIDI drums and keyboards; Harmonix is currently considering how best to work keyboard notation into relevant older tracks. As ever, compatibility with older game instruments extends to both the *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* franchises.



The MIDI Pro-Adapter box (left) has a US retail price of $40 and comes in console-specific flavours, theoretically opening the door to any MIDI-packing drums or keyboards



"There's little bitty bands who've never made a record before, and then there's bands like Third Eye Blind, sat right next to some nerd rock artist or Flight Of The Conchords," Drake explains.

"Or the Project Hate MCMXCIX," adds Nordhaus.

Drake nods: "Black metal. Weird."

Nordhaus: "There was one awesome day a couple of months ago where we had their song Descend Into The Eternal Pits Of Possession, and on the same day we added Itsy Bitsy Spider. We've had really random tracks come through – we've had techno stuff, a guy doing some pretty amazing MIDI remixes of Beethoven, kids' songs, ska, jazz. All this stuff that would have never made it into DLC. You can find almost anything now if you want to go look for it."

"And it pays," says Drake. "I've done three songs for one friend's band, two songs for another, and 17 of my own songs. It's $50 or $100 a year for me because it's through XNA, but other than that it's basically free to work with these tools, and we've sold thousands of songs. Our band has made thousands of dollars from this. It's not strictly about profit, but it's nice to get money back for something we'd do for free anyway, because it's such a cool medium to be part of."

Is that what we're calling *Rock Band* now? A medium? Fair enough, in a way. You can, after all, only push, break and sidestep so many boundaries before basic terms like 'rhythm game' look rather, well, *basic*. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Much is unknown about *RB3*, and there are plenty of ways, in both hardware and software, for those boundaries to snap ruthlessly back in place – for that bridge between worlds to crumble. At worst, what we're looking at could be merely the best game in its series by a huge margin – and one, remember, that you can very much enjoy with your existing kit. At best, it changes everything.

From top: the two-octave keyboard controller, with its typical array of game and console buttons; the Squier Stratocaster real guitar/controller hybrid; the latest drum kit hardware, complete with expansion cymbals

GREATEST HITS

With 83 bands on the disc, ongoing DLC and backwards compatibility with previous *Rock Band*, *AC/DC Live: Rock Band*, *Lego Rock Band* and *Green Day: Rock Band* tracks, *Rock Band 3* shouldn't be short of tunes. Ever. Here's the current set list:

- B-52s: Rock Lobster
- Bob Marley And The Wailers: Get Up, Stand Up
- The Cure: Just Like Heaven
- Def Leppard: Foolin'
- Dio: Rainbow In The Dark
- The Doors: Break On Through
- Filter: Hey Man, Nice Shot
- Foreigner: Cold As Ice
- HIM: Killing Loneliness
- Huey Lewis And The News: The Power Of Love
- Ida Maria: Oh My God
- INXS: Need You Tonight
- Jane's Addiction: Been Caught Stealing
- Jimi Hendrix: Crosstown Traffic
- Joan Jett: I Love Rock And Roll
- Juanes: Me Enamora
- Mana: Oye Me Amor
- Marilyn Manson: The Beautiful People
- Metric: Combat Baby
- Night Ranger: Sister Christian
- Ozzy Osbourne: Crazy Train
- Phoenix: Lasso
- Poni Hoax: Antibodies
- Queen: Bohemian Rhapsody
- Rammstein: Du Hast
- Rilo Kiley: Portions For Foxes
- Roxette: The Look
- Slipknot: Before I Forget
- Smash Mouth: Walkin' On The Sun
- Spacehog: In The Meantime
- Stone Temple Pilots: Plush
- Tears For Fears: Everybody Wants To Rule The World
- Them Crooked Vultures: Before I Forget
- Tokio Hotel: Humanoid
- The Vines: Get Free
- War: Low Rider
- The White Stripes: The Hardest Button To Button
- Whitesnake: Here I Go Again



RHYTHM KING

ELUSIVE HARMONIX BOSS ALEX RIGOPULOS DISCUSSES THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE GENRE HE HELPED CREATE

Being the founder and CEO of Harmonix apparently earns you one of the few office spaces not buried under heaps of music paraphernalia. Which is not to say that **Alex Rigopulos** (above) doesn't have any, he just has a bit more room to spread it all around. Like the people he employs, his passion for music is such that we're afraid to test it for fear it might erupt, showering us in band names so obscure we'll have to burn all our Gringo Records albums in shame. So we ask him about boring old videogames instead.

How has the culture at Harmonix changed over the years? Walking around, it looks more like the studio you'd expect to have made *Rock Band* than *Frequency*.
First of all, I think the cultural atmosphere here has remained remarkably intact over the last ten years. We've grown dramatically over the last four, but the culture's pretty much weathered that expansion. In terms of the degree to which the studio seems steeped in rock culture, that's very much a consequence of spending the last five year focusing most of our creative energy on *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*. It's also the fact that many of the people in the company are rock musicians, so the focus on the *Rock Band* franchise has let us invest that aspect of ourselves into the environment. But there are a lot of people here who love dance music, electronic music, or who are active participants in music outside of the rock sphere. So, when *Dance Central* got airborne, you'll see a lot of those elements start to assert themselves again, and I think you'll see increasing momentum over time. There's a lot of unexplored terrain, and as we go there over time – which we will – you'll see those cultural elements come back.

Will you ever consider taking a step back and revisiting *Frequency* and *Amplitude*?
The short answer is yes, absolutely. Those early games were near and dear to our hearts. We loved those games and of course have been focused on other areas in recent years. *Rock Band*'s been focused on rock music, *Dance Central* has the luxury of focusing on all kinds of other music, but in terms of rhythm-action-type games focused on electronica, that's something we'd love to come back to at the right moment in time. Or something completely new focused on that style of music.

Why were they so niche? Was it just the youth of the genre or because they were so scientific? Are they just too narrow for you to consider now?
I don't think they have to be. Our earlier games were. I think it was a combination of factors. If you look back at *Frequency* and *Amplitude*, first of all, at that point music games were still nascent in the west – most gamers had no idea what a rhythm-action game was. Furthermore, a lot of the music chosen for those games leaned toward the underground; the cool kids knew it but the mainstream certainly didn't. And visually, the way those games were presented was forbidding to the uninitiated. There will be an opportunity to come back to experiences like that, but where the presentation's a little more accessible to a wider audience.

Was Pro Mode on the cards from the very earliest days of *Guitar Hero*?
I think some elements of it were. From the beginning, we've seen this spectrum between fully simulated music-making and real music-making, and it's been an ambition of ours to move along it with each iteration. When we moved from *Guitar Hero* to *Rock Band* and started doing drumming gameplay, we saw that as an opportunity for more authentic simulation. And the singing is really singing, of course. I wouldn't say the specifics of the design were apparent to us way back then, but the ambition to bridge the gap has been there, and an acknowledgement that the guitar would be the hardest instrument to do it on.



With its single instrument, basic features and chunky HUD, the five-year-old original *Guitar Hero* looks antiquated next to the glossy *Dance Central* (right)

How do you stop growth turning into bloat?
The challenge we face as game designers is that, at this point, the *Rock Band* audience is so large and diverse that it's not one unified voice. When you're making a game like, I don't know, *Halo*, as a designer you have a pretty clear idea who you're making it for, and you can make feature-set decisions in a very targeted way for that one flavour. When you're making *Rock Band* it's very different. For example, at one extreme we have really competitive, hardcore players who only play on Expert and want to see how their score stacks up against friends. That's a minority of our audience but an extremely important and vocal one, and, man, you want to keep those guys happy.

But at the same time, the majority of the audience are really social, casual party players. They want to have a few drinks, invite their friends over and just put the game on to have fun. Most of them don't even pay attention to the score. That group of people has a very different set of design needs. There are all kinds of ways you can slice the audience, and each axis has all kinds of needs they're very vocal about. We could, as designers, make the decision to write off a portion of that audience. But I think the potential applicability of the platform is broad enough that it's our burden to create a platform that can accommodate different audiences, and compartmentalise the feature-set in such a way that if you're a casual player who doesn't care about competition, it's just hidden from you. It doesn't feel like Microsoft Windows where all this functionality's thrust upon you.



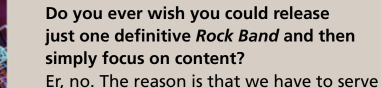
Frequency (above) and *Amplitude* (right) share the unenviable trait of being partly unplayable on the latest DualShock controllers, the analogue triggers replacing shoulder buttons vital to high-level play. Work around that, though, and you'll find the games have aged brilliantly, their *Tempest*-style score attacks and instrument-agnostic lanes providing unique experiences

How is the direction set for *Rock Band* as a brand? A Beatles edition and a Green Day edition feel like quite disparate things.
It goes back to market segmentation: these are games but they're all about connecting people with the music. And people are very passionate about music, but their tastes are highly segmented. One man's trash is another man's treasure, and everyone's opinions are right. Collectively, if you look at the *Rock Band* audience, you have this huge appetite for music and a lot of segmentation, but there are significant pockets. The Beatles was obviously one paramount example, but there are a lot of

> "People are very passionate about music, but their tastes are highly segmented. One man's trash is another man's treasure"

different segments. Green Day was a very different artist for a very different market, which had a bunch of music that covered a long period of time. And their music has evolved considerably over time and is very well suited to the game. Obviously, it was a very different scale of production and all of that.

Just how successful was *The Beatles: Rock Band*? Were you braced for the worst?
From my point of view, we were basically pretty happy with the outcome. Certainly creatively we were happy. The sales numbers are well over a couple of million units. So it hasn't sold at the same level as the other core *Rock Band* titles, but they're still respectable. It's hard to know where these things are going to go.





Do you ever wish you could release just one definitive *Rock Band* and then simply focus on content?
Er, no. The reason is that we have to serve the audience along two axes. One is content, where we're constantly releasing new music. But we also need to innovate features, to keep the experience fresh. You need new forms of interaction, and we've tried to put a lot of that into *Rock Band 3* – but I hardly think we're done.

How much do you want to integrate Harmonix into the music industry itself?
I do think it's absolutely critical that we become deeply integrated, and that has very much happened and will continue to happen further. Pro Mode is an excellent opportunity for that. We've always wanted to get to a point where… You know, if a big band is releasing a new record, producing a music video is just something that they do. The fans expect it and it's a critical form of promotion. We've got to a point where a lot of new artists feel that getting that content on to the *Rock Band* platform, where their fans can experience it interactively, is just another thing they do. And not a week goes by when some other artist or publishing label doesn't call MTV and say their artist loves the game and wants to do a collaboration of some kind. It's a huge change from a few years ago where these companies didn't care about us. We're pretty much there now, pretty much front of line for artists releasing new content.

Does that power bring a sense of great responsibility? Are you shaping music's future?
The way in which we specifically endeavour to shape its future is that we want to recondition the mainstream's notion of what music entertainment is, to include playing with music, not just listening on a stereo or watching a live show. And that can manifest itself in many different forms, but the key change is that people come to expect they can interact with the music that they love. We've already driven that change to a significant degree, but there's a lot more to be done.

What do you make of *Guitar Hero* playing fast and loose with famous likenesses?
Honestly, that design choice never made much sense to me. We've done *The Beatles* and *Green Day* as ways to experience those bands, but the point of the *Rock Band* platform is that it's about the player. It's about people making their own avatars, their own representation of themselves in that world, and living that rock simulation. That kind of mish-mash integration never made design sense for us, and even then the notion of one personality performing another's music, that's just one step… It *really* never made sense to us. But we're probably not likely to see much of that in the future of *Guitar Hero* based on the way things went down last year.

"We want to recondition the mainstream's notion of what music is, to include playing with music, not just listening"

What's your relationship with the *Guitar Hero* franchise now? Do you try to ignore it and just focus on your own agenda?
I wouldn't say we ignore it entirely because it would be foolhardy not to pay attention. But, by the same token, we view it as our responsibility to decide where the category should be evolving towards, and that it should be looking forward rather than back. In that regard, we don't spend a lot of time looking at what *Guitar Hero*'s doing.

Does Activision's attitude make you worry about its commercial threat, both to *Rock Band*'s slice and the genre's vitality?
I place a high degree of faith in the notion that if we focus on quality,



The Pro Guitar HUD in one of its quieter moments, though still a lot busier than the early tutorials. The very first sticks to just a single note and string, and won't be content until you've proved yourself

and on creating the most compelling experiences possible, that will pay off in time. And in fact, even if you just look at the trajectory of market share over the last few years, *Rock Band* started out as a substantial underdog but has gained every year since we launched. And I'd like to think that's in part a testament to our focus on quality above all else.

Presumably Harmonix is happy making music games. Is there no itch to try something like *AntiGrav* again?
Not really. Honestly, our reason for being is making music games. There are already countless very talented developers out in the world making other kinds of games, and our calling is to make the very best music games we can.

Frankly, we were struggling as a studio when we made *AntiGrav*. We had released *Frequency* and *Amplitude* through Sony which, while critically successful, were not commercially successful. And *Karaoke Revolution*, which fared similarly. We had a great relationship with Sony but at that point they came to us and said: 'Look, we love you guys and you make great games, but we can't keep funding music games that don't sell. So we have this new device, the EyeToy, that's been quite successful in Europe, and we'd like you to help us launch it in the US. Could you guys do something different to what's been done by the European studios?'

We had to do a lot of soul-searching about that, because we'd made ourselves as a music company. But we had bills to pay and a good relationship, and it hurt to take that project. And what hurt even more was the reception to it – our lowest-rated game from a Metacritic standpoint, but which sold more by a factor of about four than our best-selling music game. That led to a profound moment of self-doubt in around 2004; were we just nuts? Why were we devoting ourselves to making games no one buys? It was a pretty dark period, but fortuitously around the time we were given the opportunity to make *Guitar Hero*.



Clockwise from top: EyeToy departure *AntiGrav*, ostensibly similar to games like *SSX*; *Green Day: Rock Band*; and labour of love *The Beatles: Rock Band*, as much an artistic companion as a rhythm game

And five years from now?
We could spend the next hour on that question, depending on what happens with console hardware and all that. But there's a lot of creative terrain to explore with *Rock Band*: new forms of interaction between the player and the music. We still have some very exciting things planned.

On the *Dance Central* side, the appeal of dancing is so broad, and it's such a joyful experience, that the opportunity for cultural impact is at least as high as with *Guitar Hero* in the beginning. And finally, we also have a lot of ideas about new forms of music play beyond the purview of *Rock Band* and *Dance Central*. So our hope is just that Harmonix continues to push the envelope, and if we can entrench in the minds of the public that expectation of being able to play with the music they love, we'll have been successful.

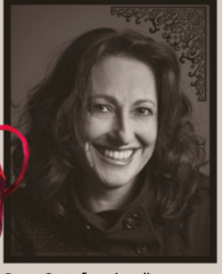


BODY MOVING

LOSS OF INHIBITIONS AND PIXEL-PERFECT CONTROL: IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO IN DANCE CENTRAL

TITLE: **DANCE CENTRAL**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MTV GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX MUSIC SYSTEMS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 4**





***Dance Central*'s project director Kasson Crooker and vice president of production Tracy** Rosenthal-Newsom

So you think you can dance? Yeah, right. If you're anything like us, so gnarled and out of shape that only the WOMAD festival will have you, then throwing shapes is probably not on your list of things to do this year. Our advice if you plan to keep it that way: stay well clear of *Dance Central*. Far from being immune to its charms or technology, you're practically its target audience.

"It took us a while to figure out what the low bar was going to be for this game," explains project director **Kasson Crooker**, who *Frequency* fans will know as the man behind Symbion Project and Freezepop, not to mention its 'fake' artists DJ HMX and Komputer Kontroller. "So we took the nerdiest dancers and the most awkward people we could find and said: 'Can you do this? Can you step sideways to the beat of some music?'"

Apparently we can, which comes as quite a surprise. That we quite fancy doing it some more is an even greater shock, and words fail us when he find we're hopping, gyrating and virtual ass-slapping to the entry-level beats of Poker Face. As much as the incredible accuracy of Kinect – "You can actually see how fine-tuned it is," notes Crooker, "I can move my hand an inch and control pixels on the screen" – the magic of *Dance Central* is how completely it removes you from yourself. Only once does it actually feed back the slightly unedifying sight of what the camera actually sees, and by then you hardly care.

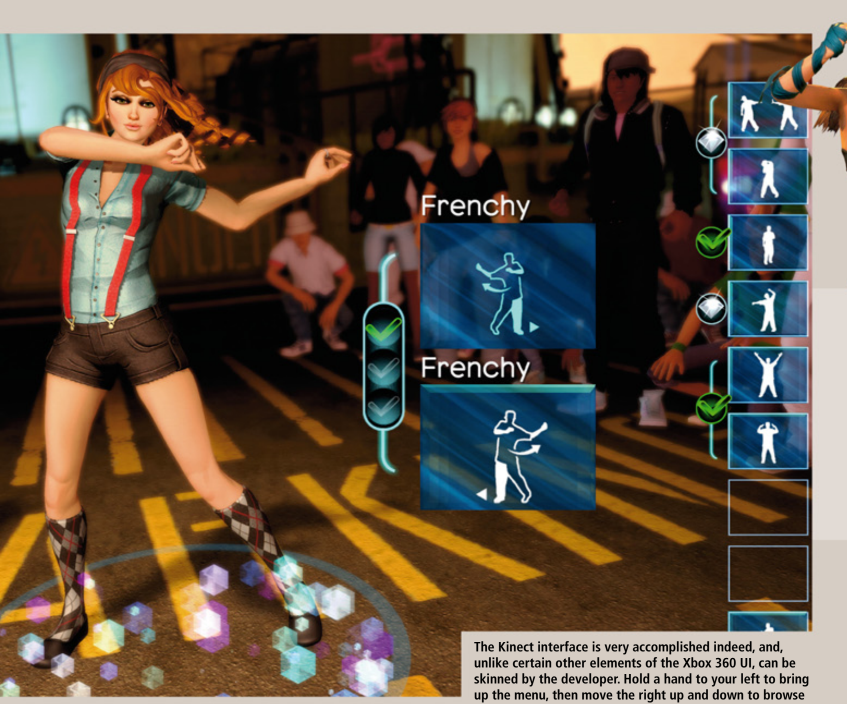
The rest of the time, you're one of eight entirely trendy, very urban avatars whose mo-capped moves, you realise, are actually more achievable than your self-loathing lets you believe. Of the three core modes in *Dance Central*, the most important must be Break It Down, which unlike *Rock Band* goes out of its way to match your faltering pace and stay there until you progress. As the name suggests, whichever track you choose is split into moves you have to learn before taking on more. A spotlight under your character is just one visual feedback system, and the positive reinforcement is constant.

"We made a very conscious decision to show you as a dancer," explains VP of production **Tracy Rosenthal-Newsom**. "And really, we want you to aspire to be better than you actually are. You'll gain skill in all of our games over time, but to become a better dancer you have to believe and gain that confidence. Not





A spotlight under your avatar gives a quick indication of how you're doing. The ghetto blaster's speakers display the usual star scoring system, while the stage itself changes with combos



The Kinect interface is very accomplished indeed, and, unlike certain other elements of the Xbox 360 UI, can be skinned by the developer. Hold a hand to your left to bring up the menu, then move the right up and down to browse

"You can actually see how fine-tuned Kinect is. I can move my hand an inch and control pixels on the screen"

everyone knows they have an inherent sense of rhythm, and one of the things we realised is that we need people to feel, to understand step touch, which is really basic. If you go into a dance club or you're hanging out somewhere listening to music, you tend to start doing it. That's actually the entry point to all our choreography."

They might be essentially different, but Kinect and PlayStation's Move do have something in common: neither lets you do things by halves. For a system that would seem to be all about precision, it's the biggest moves that really define *Dance Central*. Unless they're Ian Curtis, stage performers don't tend to dance like they're in a crowded underground train, and while its hardware can happily detect it, the game isn't standing for it. Instructed to 'step' to the side and back with a single clap, we do just that and are asked to try again. So we hop – still not good enough. Only when we launch into action like a latter-day Luke Goss, head, shoulders and all, are we finally accepted. And then it's 'Flawless!' because, true to the game's word, the biggest hurdle is mental. It's the best advertisement for the peripheral so far, for while others can tell if you're moving, only Kinect can tell if you're enjoying it.

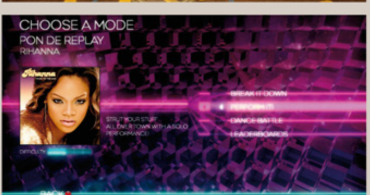
"The PS2 camera was too limited," says Crooker. "We looked at dance pads and thought, 'Well, those are really fun but it's just button-mashing using your feet'. Wii came along and we shot it down for the same reason: you just end up with arm motions. It wasn't until GDC over a year ago that Microsoft showed us Natal for the first time, and even though it was pretty rough, their demo proved it could see people in the room, didn't care about what they wearing, or if it was total darkness or under fluorescent lights. And it could see hi-definition joint deformation, and the latency was low enough that we knew we could do a *dance* game."

There are still quirks in the detection, which Harmonix blames on a few work-in-progress gesture filters it promises to have fixed before launch. And the aforementioned camera feature, a freestyle bonus where you prance about and are promptly 'rewarded' with an animated GIF, isn't quite as great/awful as it sounds. "We looked into storing and sharing but it was just too much work considering what else we're doing," Crooker explains. "Microsoft don't let you store the photos to a console-level location, they have to be stored in the game's save file. And I'm like, 'Why can't we just push it to somewhere you can actually read?' You've got a dashboard button that says 'Pictures' – it'd be great if you could just go there and see pictures from all your Kinect games, then push them to Facebook or wherever. So we passed on it this round."

THE CLASH

Wannabe Hansels (he's so hot right now) and Zoolanders can finally duke it out in Dance Battle, the game's inevitable multiplayer mode. Details are frustratingly scarce as Harmonix isn't talking about it, but it sounds more like a turn-based contest than something to test Kinect's double vision. What we can say is that *Dance Central* does let you dance side by side, or even in a group, without forgetting who's in charge. The additional players just won't be recognised in-game. Control is allocated on a first come, first served basis, so whoever's closest to the camera is the one officially playing. Only when someone steps *in front* of the player does the gesture tracking change focus.







In the demo, getting three ticks and thereby mastering a move is much tougher than just fluking the first. This might well be thanks to the work-in-progress gestural filters

“In our perfect world, everyone wears

T5Q9









THE EMPIRE

















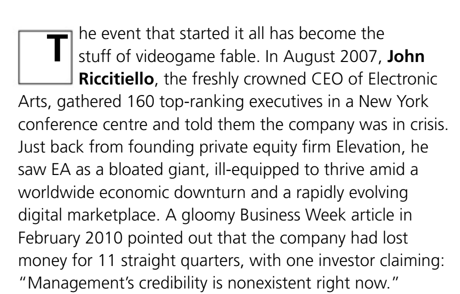





STRIKES BACK

LEANER AND EXTENSIVELY REMODELLED, THE FORMER UNDISPUTED LEADER IN THIRDPARTY VIDEOGAME PUBLISHING HAS ITS SIGHTS SET ON RECLAIMING THE NUMBER ONE SPOT





The event that started it all has become the stuff of videogame fable. In August 2007, **John Riccitiello**, the freshly crowned CEO of Electronic Arts, gathered 160 top-ranking executives in a New York conference centre and told them the company was in crisis. Just back from founding private equity firm Elevation, he saw EA as a bloated giant, ill-equipped to thrive amid a worldwide economic downturn and a rapidly evolving digital marketplace. A gloomy Business Week article in February 2010 pointed out that the company had lost money for 11 straight quarters, with one investor claiming: "Management's credibility is nonexistent right now."

Riccitiello's solution was two-pronged. Initially, he sought to streamline the business by laying off staff and closing failing studios. From October 2008 to November 2009 the company axed over 2,500 jobs, while peripheral studios like Pandemic, Black Box and Westwood were either shut down or consolidated into other facilities. "I've been at EA for much of my career," says EA Games head **Frank Gibeau**, "and some of the folks, some of the studios we decided not to continue with, were people that I'd known for a very long time. Coupled with what was













happening in the global economy… it was far from pleasant."

Riccitiello also announced that he would be radically reducing the release roster. There were too many mediocre games, too many uninspired sequels. "It was our 'fewer, bigger, better' strategy," clarifies EA COO **John Schappert**. "A couple of years ago we shipped 67 titles; this year we'll ship 36. Our goal is: 'Let's make sure the titles we're going to make are great'."

So, three years on from the beginning of the EA transformation, where does the company stand? Is the Riccitiello revolution working?

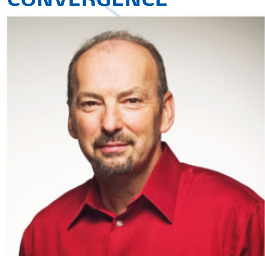
What many analysts agree on is that EA is working hardest to exploit the emerging digital, social and casual gaming sectors. Riccitiello's big plan is to augment falling boxed copy sales with profits mined in these new areas – although, in truth, this process began before his era. In 2005, the publisher bought mobile game developer Jamdat for $680m, gaining both a talented studio and two key licensed brands: *Tetris* and *Bejeweled*. The following year, EA Asia successfully launched *FIFA Online* in Korea, a free-to-play version of the sports sim, complete with microtransactions. It was the first ever example of a boxed games series moving into a freemium product, and its sequel reportedly earns over $1m per month in virtual goods sales from five million registered users.

Since then, Riccitiello has brought freemium thinking into the heart of the company. Opening gambit *Battlefield Heroes* has been followed by *Tiger Woods Online* and *Lord Of Ultima*, with the ambitious racing MMOG *Need For Speed World* and the global version of *FIFA Online* still in beta. The aim, as EA sees it, is to meet the needs of an emerging casual user base, which refuses to pay outright for games.

Senior vice president of EA's global online group, **Andrew Wilson**, believes the forces that drove the freemium explosion in the east will also shape things in the west: "What folks were saying to us in Korea, China and South East Asia was: 'It's not that we don't want to pay for the product – we want you to prove that the product is good and that we can play it with our friends. If you can prove that, we will then pay to enhance and expand that experience'. It's a shift from 'build it, launch it and hope that they pay', to 'build it, launch it and convince them that paying is a good idea'."



STRATEGY SNAPSHOT: CONVERGENCE

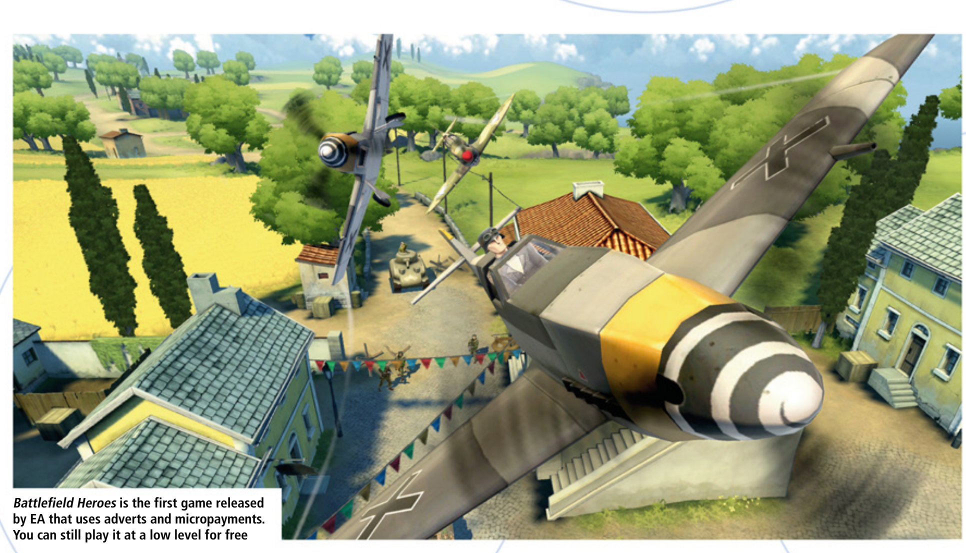


EA Sports chief Peter Moore: "We'll announce a little closer to the launch of *FIFA 11* how games will have a presence across [many platforms]. It might be as simple as recognising you, or congratulating you on a goal you scored. We'll be talking about games that say: 'I know who you are, I know what your club is and here's a more customised experience on your iPad based upon our knowledge of you'. It's tied to our Nucleus ID systems, and our database of your football experiences."

It's been a steep learning curve. *Battlefield Heroes* attracted mediocre reviews and was heavily criticised earlier this year when the payment model was changed, making it almost impossible to progress through the game without paying for new weapons. "The perception was: 'Oh, EA has fucked this up, we're never going to play again,'" says **Patrick Soderlund**, SVP and group general manager of EA Games' FPS and driving titles. "But funnily enough, when we changed the way you pay, we had more players, and the game is now profitable. I view it as a five-year project. We're going to continue to invest in it and continue changing it. It's very successful."

So successful, apparently, that the *Heroes* team is now a separate unit, with over 100 staff working on more freemium titles. And EA learned quickly from what was essentially an experiment in virtual goods. Last summer, Gibeau effectively saved the RTS title *Battleforge* by reducing the boxed copy price and hiking up the downloadable paid-for content. Suddenly, the company had gamers paying up to $100 for premium weaponry.

The virtual goods sector is a puzzle, then, and it's one EA has a head start on solving. While Activision Blizzard concentrates on console smashes and its gargantuan *WOW* business, EA is testing new models and new audiences. "Sure, consoles are where we make the lion's share of our revenue," concedes Schappert, "but $750m of our revenue next year will come from digital sectors. We're the global number one mobile publisher; we sell more apps on the iPhone than anyone else. And when we do our projections, that side is growing so quickly, we're running as fast as



***Battlefield Heroes* is the first game released by EA that uses adverts and micropayments. You can still play it at a low level for free**



***FIFA Superstars* points at the future of EA's drive into social gaming. All franchises are malleable in this new market**

we possibly can toward it. And that's why we bought Playfish last autumn."

The purchase of Playfish bought EA slap bang into the middle of the social gaming revolution. $400m seemed like a lot to pay at the time, but then, in July, Disney blew $600m on rival Facebook developer Playdom, and suddenly EA's outlay seemed almost modest. While the general consensus is that EA made a smart move (the business is moving too fast to get on at the bottom rung with a fresh in-house studio), it's not a simple place to launch products any more. Since the deal, Facebook has changed its rules on notifications, effectively banning game-makers from spamming the news updates of their players, thereby removing a potent source of promotion. The aftermath saw a big drop in monthly active users across the board, with developers including Playfish and Zynga losing millions of gamers and leading some analysts to suggest that Facebook had already peaked as a profitable gaming platform. Into this turbulent market, EA Playfish has released four titles – city building sim *My Empire*, virtual dollhouses *Hotel City* and *Restaurant City*, and the inevitable *FIFA* spin-off *FIFA Superstars*. Out of those, only *Hotel City* is troubling the top 25 chart. Chief financial officer Eric Brown recently pointed out that EA's Facebook portfolio has 52 million monthly active users; reasonably large, but a fraction of Zynga's 260 million.

Elsewhere, the company is busily rethinking its relationship with core gamers, making that painful transition from a supplier of boxed goods to a service provider. Hence, DLC has become a lynchpin. "It's absolutely integral," says Schappert. "Every console game has DLC on day one and post-launch. Some of it is free, some of it is paid-for, but ultimately we think of software as a service. The days of the fire-and-forget singleplayer game that comes out at packaged goods retail are over."

Wilson also argues that the company's commitment to online multiplayer is unparalleled: "As a collective we've invested more in connectivity innovation than any other dev team, studio or publisher in the world."

"A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO WE SHIPPED 67 TITLES; THIS YEAR WE'LL SHIP 36. OUR GOAL IS: 'LET'S MAKE SURE THE TITLES WE'RE GOING TO MAKE ARE GREAT'"

To ease the transition, the company is bringing in execs from other consumer businesses, learning the tricks of a service economy. "We're especially looking at consumer internet," says Schappert. "It has a lot of interesting acquisition and retention techniques and strategies that are very applicable to games. We hire people from classic affinity programmes like frequent flyers and Best Buy points. I mean, Gun Club [EA's reward scheme for shooter players] is a frequent flyers scheme! What's interesting is that we don't do as good a job of acquiring customers as a lot of online firms, but it's easy for us to monetise them."

EA has also been quick to react – not always successfully or with consumer approval – to less welcome consumer activities. To protect itself from piracy, it experimented with DRM measures like SecuROM, which users found invasive and restrictive and was swiftly abandoned amid a PR warzone. More recently, it has instigated the EA Sports Online Pass, in which purchasers of pre-owned games are charged a $10 (£6.50) fee to access downloadable content that's free to initial buyers. "Online Pass is something that's gone throughout our label to mitigate the escalating and sometimes very challenging costs of running some of the most successful videogames as far as online gameplay's concerned," says **Dave Rutter**, the lead producer on *FIFA*. "It's something that, as a company, we took a decision on, and the game teams all got onboard." It has not been overwhelmingly popular, but then unlike Activision CEO Bobby Kotick, Riccitiello hasn't been making noises about charging a subscription for online play. Well, not yet anyway.

But amid all the talk of change, the adoption of new business models, the decisive move on to emerging platforms, EA has not yet fought its way back into rude health. The company began the year by twice slashing its financial forecasts, eventually telling analysts that it expected to lose between $197m (£127m) and $295m (£190m) for the fiscal year 2011.

When we spoke to videogame business author and blogger **Nicholas Lovell** at the Develop conference in July, he said: "My number one fear is that EA's shareholders will lose patience with John Riccitiello's strategy. He is trying to turn a supertanker. My guess is that he pitched that it would take three years and it looks like it will take seven. Public market shareholders are generally short-termist, and I fear that they will not have the patience to see it through. Which would be particularly galling for John, as his successor would claim credit for all the painful work that he has done."

But the tanker *is* turning. Decent sales of *Mass Effect 2* and *Battlefield Bad Company 2*





were stabilising things by the time EA announced its Q4 figures in May, then *FIFA Road To World Cup* shifted six million copies. This year's well-regarded E3 roster boasted a transformed *Madden*, strong reboots in *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* and *Medal Of Honor*, and *Dead Space 2*. Plus, there's a significant giant on the horizon: *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (see p31). "It will be EA's most aggressive approach yet to tackling the multibillion dollar MMORPG business," says analyst **Jesse Divnich** of EEDAR. "If successful, the game could easily generate an additional $500 million a year."

And certainly the EA Partners programme, which handles sales, distribution and marketing for independent developers, has flourished during Riccitiello's occupancy. Valve, Crytek, Harmonix, Epic and Insomniac are now on board, offering the likes of *Crysis 2*, *Bulletstorm* and *Rock Band 3* into the mix. And signing up the founders of Infinity Ward as Respawn Entertainment must have felt like a satisfying victory over Activision, although EA Partners chief **David DeMartino** demurs at any suggestion that EA was actively involved before the Infinity Ward sackings. "I wish I could sit here and take more credit for getting one up on Activision," he says, "but when you fire two of your most creative people you kind of open the door for someone else to step in. The guys were handed out into the community and we were certainly quick to act."

The word from these developers is that EA is a helpful, non-obtrusive presence. Klei Entertainment is one of the two smaller studios brought into the EA Arthouse programme, set up to nurture indie talent, and the company's





Top: Andrew Wilson, senior vice president of EA's global online group. Above: Dave Rutter, lead producer on the *FIFA Soccer* games

CEO, **Jamie Cheng**, has been surprised by the process. "At first, I was like, really? Work with EA? I've never heard anything good about that! I thought, 'I've started an indie studio, I'm not sure I want to work with these guys.' But it's awesome, it's been a really fun experience."

It's a far cry from the EA of the '90s, when studios like Bullfrog and Westwood were crudely assimilated into the group, often with disastrous results. And mastering these deals may be a vital element of the publisher's future success. As Divnich asserts: "Over the last 18 months we have seen a significant shift to independent publishing by big studios such as Valve, Respawn and Bungie. The biggest opportunity for EA and all publishers is focusing on these developing partnerships. While the profits and margins are much smaller through these distribution deals, it is still revenue that cannot be left on the table. Landing these multi-title exclusive deals is crucial for long-term success in this industry."

Ultimately, one of the most important, but conversely lowest profile, changes effected by Riccitiello has been in working environment. Eight years ago, a blog post complaining about long working hours at an unnamed studio sparked the EA Spouse controversy, which turned the company into a symbol of the game industry's gruelling crunch culture. "Our 'fewer bigger, better' approach improves the development process fundamentally," says Schappert. "Part of the doldrums we went





The Old Republic **(top) and *Bulletstorm* (above) represent EA's strong relationships with third parties. Both will be key titles**



A spearhead of the concept of premium games on XBLA and PSN, *Battlefield 1943* broke new ground for EA in terms of its approach to distribution



Criterion has been given three years to totally rethink the *Need For Speed* brand with *Hot Pursuit*. The publisher says the days of slavish annual iteration are over

STRATEGY SNAPSHOT: RESOURCE RUSH



Patrick Soderlund: "*Battlefield 1943* was born within the studio as a way for us to deploy resources that were in between projects. Because when you have large teams, when they're done with something, you can't put 40–50 people on something else immediately – they might not have anything to do for five weeks. So we just put two people on *1943* full-time – a producer and a designer – and then we had people flow into the project – when someone became free they ended up on *1943* for two weeks – and that's how it started. It was a perfect opportunity for people within the studio to do whatever they wanted. And a lot of our free-to-play games and DLC content come from that kind of resourcing."

through, where we over-iterated our titles… we didn't have enough time between iterations to develop that big new idea, or to give our dev teams time to execute it. But that's not how we do things any more. There's a bevy of new properties that we've brought to bear that are pretty good – and we're giving our dev teams the time to make them. With *NFS*, it's been eight years since the last *Hot Pursuit*, and we've been working on *MOH* for over three years."

Talking to the teams themselves, it seems that long hours are inevitably still part of the game development process. The difference is, the work is managed within the context of making ostensibly better games over which the studio staff have more creative control. *Dead Space* is the poster boy for this new era, pitched out of the blue by a small group of executive producers and green-lit with immense speed. "At that point in time, there was a very conscious decision to get away from existing franchises and try to get more into the original IP landscape," says **Shereif Fattouh**, associate producer at *Dead Space* studio Visceral. "Some of the key creative people in the studio were working on different ideas, and *Dead Space* really resonated with the whole team."

And this wasn't an isolated example – suddenly it was company policy. "The days of someone at the top of the company saying we should make this or that kind of game are gone," says **Darren Potter**, a producer at EA Bright Light. "Now it's a case of having cracking new ideas. With [upcoming PSN/XBLA action adventure] *Spare Parts*, the concept came from within the studio and was pitched up to [EA Play chief] Rod Humble. We started thinking, well, there's a market here on XBLA, but rather than making small games, why don't we do a full boxed product that you can download? We just thought it was a cool thing to try – it's a different canvas to paint a game on."

"THE DAYS OF SOMEONE AT THE TOP OF THE COMPANY SAYING WE SHOULD MAKE THIS OR THAT GAME ARE GONE. NOW IT'S A CASE OF HAVING CRACKING IDEAS"

"We've had some phenomenal ideas come out of the craziest places," continues Wilson. "I mean, Be A Pro in *FIFA* was one guy. He came in and said: 'Listen, I think I can build a mode that will let you play as a single player'. He was a camera engineer – a junior employee, but a really passionate guy. He said: 'If you let me go off on the side, I think I can come back to you with a prototype that'll make this work'. So we let him go and he came back with Be A Pro. And now each time he comes in with an idea, he gets to build it. We try and breed that culture: it's not about hierarchies, it's about building a team."

To some extent this sense of experimentation has been formalised into the company structure. EA's studios are now run as city states, separate,



Crytek's *Crysis 2* has recently been delayed until March 2011. No reason has been supplied for the shift, but perhaps it can be seen as more evidence that EA is prepared to indulge developers with more time and space



With *Medal Of Honor* (below), *Crysis 2*, *Bulletstorm* and the *Battlefield* series, EA plans to wrest control of the FPS from Activision. It's the key console focus of the EA Games label

semi-autonomous regions within the global empire. "What's most important, and what leads to the best possible products, is giving people the freedom to develop their own local cultures," says Gibeau. "It's a very thoughtful, methodical process. Our studios have the opportunity to develop their own personalities, their own leadership." Hence, EA Redwood Shores becomes Visceral Games, EA Guildford becomes Bright Light. *Burnout* creator Criterion didn't become EA Guildford. The thinking is simple: with a brand comes identity, and with identity comes pride and commitment.

Even with the annual sports titles, EA is making room for speculative thinking. The *FIFA* dev team has been split in two, with a majority of the staff working on yearly iterations, while a smaller squad develops new gameplay elements that might not figure for several years. The latest example, controllable goalkeepers (announced at Gamescom), mean online matches can now be 11 vs 11 – an EA Sports ambition since online play was first touted.

Clearly, though, the growing digital and casual sectors will remain key elements of the EA strategy. At EA Play, **Rod Humble** is working on titles that expand the publisher's remit beyond traditional games. The first example will be his sandbox-style construction package, *Create*. "Over the next few years, the areas of growth are really simple," he begins. "I mean, name a form of entertainment where romance, comedy and drama aren't at the top of the charts – the answer is gaming, so you can expect me to fill in that gap. It just seems obvious. I also think you'll see us expand into games that are intellectually stimulating or offer lifestyle merits. You saw that with fitness to some extent and with the music games, where people could feel like a rock star for a while – but we'll see new areas opening up."

"THE AREAS OF GROWTH ARE SIMPLE. YOU'LL SEE US EXPAND INTO GAMES THAT ARE INTELLECTUALLY STIMULATING OR THAT OFFER LIFESTYLE MERITS"

Gibeau, meanwhile, sees a future in which EA experiments further with new forms of content delivery, citing the digital-only release of *Battlefield 1943* as an inspiration. "That was an experiment and it worked great. Not everything has to be a big PS3 game – you want to have those but you also want to branch out into other delivery models and opportunities, different price points, different entertainments; those types of bite-sized or tailored experiences. I mean, would you pay $15 for six hours of gameplay, instead of $60 for 60 hours? Can we mix those up?"

EA is already evolving the business, blurring the lines between boxed goods, digital downloads and the freemium model. FIFA Ultimate Team, for example, is a downloadable add-on to the boxed versions of *FIFA 09* and *FIFA 10*, allowing players to build up fantasy squads of the world's best players. Users can earn new players by winning online tournaments, but they can also purchase booster packs to quickly build their rosters – a classic freemium strategy, but one that's hidden within a piece of DLC. There have also been interesting symbiotic projects, like the Go To Hell Facebook app used to promote *Dante's Inferno*, the *Battlefield Heroes* Facebook referral scheme, and Peter Moore's beloved Live Broadcast concept, which wants to turn online multiplayer into a competitive sport. EA Sports has also just signed up to become the official sports technology partner of the UK Premier League, providing its presentation technologies – and its branding, of course – to live match broadcasts. It's similar to a deal with ESPN in the US. EA wants the worlds of real and virtual sport to be indistinguishable – and it wants to control our relationship with them all.

As for emerging platforms like iPad, Facebook and smartphones, the next stage is more challenging titles. "What we're seeing [in Korea] now is the evolution of the freemium model," says Wilson. "It never used to be about the core game mechanic, it was only ever about social connection – and that's where Facebook is right now. But now gamers in Asia are evolving and the big titles are firstperson shooters and RTS games and MMORPGs – all still with that social connection. So when we look at the games we're building in the future, we believe that Facebook gamers will evolve like the gamers in China and Korea – they'll look for more interactive, immersive experiences, but they'll have to be rooted in that social connection. So I look at Facebook and I see an opportunity for us."

The ambition, according to Schappert, would appear to be convergence – the idea that you can share data and experience between, say, your iPad and your console version of each title: "You're not going to see us take our whole portfolio and port everything over to these new devices. We'll bring the games that make sense. But we want [the different versions] to be connected in some way. That's an area of opportunity for us. Frankly, there's such a proliferation of platforms. Two years ago there was no iPhone, and at the moment everyone's showing me Google apps – it's not cool unless it's on an Android handset! We need that world to stabilise a little bit so we can catch our breath. Then



we can go: 'Let's bring all that functionality together'. That's certainly where we are going."

The big question now is can EA really have it all? Can it really succeed in the traditional console sector and the emerging casual and social realms? One industry veteran is unsure, and his view when it comes to EA is important. Because he founded it. "To give it some credit, EA used its size and strategic leverage to acquire Jamdat and then Playfish," says **Trip Hawkins**. "It has demonstrated a willingness which you have not seen with most of the other big game companies to get aggressive about catching up with some of these new platforms.

"But just starting to make some products in one studio isn't the answer. If you look at the next, say, 50 years of not just the game industry but any form of media, it's going to be all about digital media delivered over a variety of networks to a variety of devices and it's probably going to be cloud-based so the public can use any computer and any network to get to the brands they want. I don't see any game company talking about and implementing that vision. And if you give [studios creative] freedom they'll just do what they've always done: pick their favourite platform, their favourite game idea, and do a lot of native development that struggles to give long-term strategic value."

But EA is pushing on. Released in early August, the company's Q1 figures showed a swing into profit ($96m, £61.5m) that has surprised analysts. And 35 per cent of the company's revenue came from the digital sector: $188 million (£120.5m) compared to $124 million in the same period last year. This was added content for FIFA Ultimate Team 2, *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect 2*, downloadable sales of *Battlefield Bad Company 2*, and mobile sales of titles like *Scrabble*. "We are gaining share on half the number of titles we had three years ago," Riccitiello told investors. "We lead on the strongest platforms and have a broad, rapidly growing base of digital businesses with powerful synergies with our packaged goods portfolio."







Top: John Schappert, chief operating officer. Centre: Rod Humble, senior vice president of EA Play. Above: CEO John Riccitiello



The *FIFA* brand remains at the core of the EA machine, extending now into the social, smartphone and freemium sectors. The console development team has been split into two, allowing more focus on fresh gameplay additions



Three years ago, soon after an $18bn merger, Activision Blizzard became the largest thirdparty publisher in the world, knocking EA from its top spot. Now EA wants it back. It certainly has a strong console line-up for 2010/11, but Activision has *StarCraft 2*, *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* and *Guitar Hero: Warriors Of Rock* to field. It will be close.

Gibeau is amusingly upbeat when referring to EA's arguably subordinate position. "It's liberating!" he laughs. "My prior role was North American lead for publishing and it was the time we really built EA Sports up – we were the market leader and constantly being attacked. I've got to tell you, being a rebel is fun!"

Symbolic at the heart of this war is a new product battle. A few years ago it was *FIFA* vs *PES* – it took several years, but EA triumphed. Now it's *Medal Of Honor* vs the biggest mainstream gaming brand in the world, *Call Of Duty*. And Gibeau is ready. "Anything we do with *Medal Of Honor* this year is a win," he says. "They're the leaders – every unit they lose is a problem, every unit I gain, I wasn't expected to have. It allows us to exercise a lot of creativity in the development and marketing teams. There isn't this intense pressure to sell 20 million units this year or we're bust. We're revelling in it!

"And we know we're not going to do it in a year – it's going to take multiple years just like they did to us. *MOH* started the genre, it was the number one game, but *COD* branched out and over time they took it. Well, you know what?" He leans forward with a conspiratorial smile. "We know how that works."

STRATEGY SNAPSHOT: GENE SPLICING



Frank Gibeau: "One of the things we fundamentally believe is that hybrid gene mixes are what work. It's the combination of two genres. When we looked at *NFS* this year, we were trying to take what's driven *Left4Dead* or firstperson shooters, because the driving category is kind of stale, and we believed that online wasn't interesting in driving games any more – you have 16 guys, you race and you finish eighth. That's not particularly fun. So we figured with *Hot Pursuit* and the game we're already working on for 2012, we needed to shake the genre up. We try to innovate, we try to bounce two genres into each other to see what experiences you can create."

An audience with…

Alex Garland

The novelist, screenwriter and now game collaborator offers a perspective on one of his favourite pastimes

When a lauded novelist and screenwriter – of a zombie movie, no less – shows an interest in making videogames, the phone rings off the hook, right? Wrong, says **Alex Garland**, whose works include The Beach, The Tesseract, 28 Days Later and what looked like being the *Halo* movie. An avid gamer keen to take videogame narrative to the next level, he endured years of rejection before Ninja Theory, well underway on its action odyssey *Enslaved*, decided to enlist his services. Meeting us at the outset of his latest project, a new Judge Dredd movie starring Karl Urban, he finds time to pass some sentences of his own.

Why do you care about videogames?
That's really easy, though the real answer will sound like PR bullshit. I'm a big gamer – I love games, always have done. When I was a kid there was a record shop, which for some reason had a *Space Invaders* machine. I used to play whenever I could. Then there was a boy on our street whose parents got him that early Atari. In fact, one of my best friends before that had *Pong*. I was just always completely fascinated and hypnotised by them, and just really wanted to play them. I grew up with them.

When I went to university I suddenly stopped being able to afford them. They just kind of dropped out of my life, having been a really big part of it. Games for me were always social – it would be about four or five friends sitting around a console or a Spectrum taking turns. Anyway, I couldn't buy games. And there were these things like the Mega Drive, and the games were incredibly expensive. I stopped being aware of them.

Then university finished and this friend turned up at my house with a Mega Drive and *Sonic*, and it blew my mind. In my absence there'd been this huge jump, and from that point on I was stuck on it. My expenditures for years would revolve around either trying to get money to buy a plane ticket to go backpacking, and then in the downtime finding £40 to buy a videogame. So, from the Mega Drive/SNES period onwards, I never really lost touch. I kept pace the whole time, would buy **Edge** and get very excited if there was a 10 review. And I guess what was happening concurrently was that, slightly to my surprise, I became a writer, first with books and then films. And I began to get seriously interested in the possibility of narrative within games – about the time of 28 Days Later, I would say.

We made some attempts to contact some game companies and get them interested. Absolute zero interest. There was one group of really nice guys, actually, who did show an interest – it was John Pickford and his brother Ste. They were lovely but, retrospectively, now I understand how game financing works, I can see that they were in a tight spot, really.

> "About the time of 28 Days Later we made some attempts to contact some game companies and get them interested. Absolute zero interest"

There was also a debate that began then within games… it was like anti-narrative and pro-narrative. There was this cable show I used to really like with journalists sitting round reviewing games, and there was this guy who did… not Paul Rose's Digitiser thing, but something for the BBC, who felt really quite fiercely that games shouldn't have narrative. And I was there throwing cups of tea at the television saying, "Yes, they should".

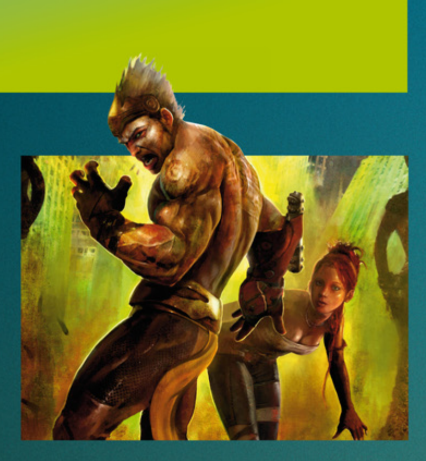
Anyway, I thought about it more and more and more. Getting knocked back by 28 Days as a game certainly didn't dampen my enthusiasm. I just see games as being like cinema was in the '20s and '30s. It's moving at a more accelerated pace than cinema but it's got unbelievable potential. And I wanted to be at the coalface at some point, trying to figure out that potential. So, when Tameem [Antoniades, creative director at Ninja Theory] approached me I'd actually been waiting for a game company to show any sort of interest in anything I could do for ages. I'd been approaching them and getting knocked back, and had sort of given up. Then Tameem turned up and I thought, 'Here's my opportunity', so I grabbed it.

Were you surprised by how involved you became?
My role was pretty well defined, and different to my day job in film. An example of the process might be: they would have a level – say, a collection of streets in New York. They would also have key gameplay elements, such as finding a robotic dragonfly to get over a minefield, and a need to describe that to the player via dialogue. So primarily my job was to help map out that dialogue within the action.

I was struck by their friendliness and open-mindedness. I never felt compartmentalised by Tameem or the designers. They were very inclusive in their discussions, and patient when I was struggling with differences in the game-making and the film-making processes. I genuinely looked forward to the weekly trip up to Cambridge. As much for just chatting about game philosophy over coffee as anything else.

Tameem Antoniades has said he learned as much from you in two years as he would otherwise in eight. What did you learn?
A huge amount. Hard to quantify. I once heard

Getty Images/Wire Image



a physicist state: "The larger the searchlight, the larger the circumference of the unknown". I think that sums up how I felt at the end of the project. But to me that's not a bad thing. The learning curve was very steep, and I was frustrated by my failure to get stuff right. I think I was probably a bit like a bull in a china shop at times. I'd be more capable if I did it again.

Have you played *Heavenly Sword*?
Well, typically in interviews, what one does is kind of lie about certain things, so I'll try to avoid doing that. I had not played *Heavenly Sword* at the moment I met Tameem, then I went and bought it. The reason I hadn't played it is because I'd bought a PlayStation 3 along with an Xbox 360, and by the time I met Tameem I'd already stopped playing on the PlayStation 3 because I was so fucking sick of it. There weren't any original games that really blew me away. I was really into Xbox Live; I was much more into playing *Call Of Duty 4* on Xbox Live. So Xbox really had its claws into me, and I just never bought *Heavenly Sword*.

Playing it eventually, though, what I thought was that there's an enormous amount of skill and polish here. To be honest, if I'd played it and thought it was crap, then I'd politely have found a way to close things down. But actually I was very impressed, because by then I knew more about my industry, the film industry, and knew how hard it is to get something which isn't pre-existing – which is to say the licence – financed and off the ground, with enough money to actually do a decent job. There were all sorts of things, and some were imaginative and some were pure production values. And a third thing, I guess, would be ambition. I liked Tameem straight away – he's a good guy.

He seems to know what he likes, too, and it isn't always the most fashionable of games: fighters, character-based thirdperson action games.

Perhaps most famous for his novel The Beach and his film work with Danny Boyle, Garland has long held an interest in working on a game project. If *Enslaved: Journey To The West* succeeds, it may serve as a catalyst for more crossovers from other media

And I think Tameem and I disagree on that. Because he's not instinctively interested in firstperson, whereas I'm more interested in firstperson and slightly distanced by thirdperson.

Did you ever play the *Riddick* games?
No, I didn't. Tameem would quote that. But I'd quote the film and he'd quote the game. I'd quote Pitch Black.

It's a game that has a very specific idea of when you should and shouldn't see your character, as if you have to be reminded that you're Riddick.
Some of the most intense gaming experiences I've got in my head – one of them is *Halo* multiplayer, because it was the first time I'd played cooperative firstperson shooters. I'd played the attacking-your-enemies kind, but proper cooperation I found really amazing. And then *Call Of Duty*, where you're talking with six or seven guys that you play with quite a lot, and that's you. I wanted to be a shell, not Riddick.

Maybe that's because you're from the film side and that isn't something you're used to, just as there are a lot of frustrated filmmakers on the game side.
Yeah, no shit [laughs]. Not least the people who made *Drake's Fortune*, which is *incredibly* cinematic. I mean, it just really functions like Indiana Jones for most of it, and very effectively.

What do you think of *Mass Effect*?
Worked really well for me. Enjoyed the narrative. Didn't get fixated on it to the degree that when the next one came out I went and bought it. That's not really an attack on it, that's just when it becomes subjective. If a new episode of *Half-Life* came out, I would get it on the day it came out, and I'd have to, as much as possible, clear my slate for the next week or so.

I guess the games I've enjoyed the most in the past few years, if I'm honest about it despite having just worked on a thirdperson game, are firstperson. I liked *Half-Life* – all the incarnations of it. *Half-Life 2*, as it's developed, I've been blown away by that, just blown away by it. And *Portal* I thought was phenomenal. *Portal* is almost like a toss-up for me, in a purist sense, between whether it's *Tempest 2000* on the Jaguar or *Portal* that's like my perfect game. Even though *Portal* wasn't multiplayer and I love multiplayer, the combination of logic, speed, gameplay, thought and narrative… it has a brilliant narrative locked into it. Any of those people who don't believe in narrative should play through *Portal*, because that's an effortless, beautifully constructed narrative – witty, engaging, mysterious. There's a sensibility across Valve's output that I find pretty stunning.

There's also often one writer, Marc Laidlaw, who drives the story. Is that sufficient, do you think, or should all developers learn to become good storytellers to a degree?
That's a really, really big question. The first thing I'd say, and I want to make this really clear, is that I was not the writer on *Enslaved* in the way that Marc is the writer on *Half-Life*. I was very emphatically a co-writer. When I arrived at that project, the levels and the characters pre-existed. Not only that, but much of the required scenes between the characters already existed as well. So, in the way I conceptualise a writer, in that he begins with a blank sheet of paper, I was not the writer.

With regard to narrative, I think what I'd say is that it's not important for everyone to understand storytelling, but it's important for them to respect it. If you're going to have a narrative within a game, you have to see it as being as valid as the gameplay. That's what it boils down to. So here [gestures towards the door] is a film production company, and lots of different people are working on Judge Dredd behind us right now. Some of them will have narrative uppermost in their minds, and some of them won't; some of them will be thinking: 'How do I design this gun?' And the design will have some narrative components. It's got to have a display that tells you what kind of ammo you're using, stuff like that. But they're not really thinking about the overall narrative picture and they don't have to, but they're also not going to do stuff that contradicts it, and if they do then someone else will correct it.

Basically, that's what you have to be able to do in games. And I don't think that happens, necessarily. Narrative is an afterthought, something which is stringing along a bunch of gameplay devices. The really important things that games need to explore – and there's a long way to go – are to do with character. People say there's character in games, and there is, but if you compare that level of characterisation to the kind you might get in Taxi Driver or Goodfellas or, for that matter, War And Peace or Hamlet, to be blunt about it as a games fan, there's a fucking gulf. And if games are going to achieve at least one area of their true potential, they need to do a lot of work. They need to involve and respect writers and place them in a particular position within their structure. That, I would also make clear, doesn't necessarily mean me. I'm not ever going to write Hamlet or make Goodfellas, but my limitations don't stop me from being able to recognise what's true. At some point, there will be someone who's able to do that, and when you combine the immersion and projection of the game experience with that level of characterisation, you're going to have an artform that's obliterating in its impact and importance.

"If games are going to achieve at least one area of their true potential, they need to do a lot of work. They need to involve and respect writers"

Let's turn to the *Halo* movie. Bungie recently said that it couldn't imagine making a film based on any single *Halo* game. How did you go about it?
I took the first game and made that into a film. I suppose what I thought was that the reason game-to-film adaptations weren't working is that people weren't sufficiently respecting the game. Whether that was right or wrong, that's what I felt. So what I did was approach the first game as if I was doing a faithful novel adaptation; it just told the story. There was no real extra stuff about the fall of Reach or anything like that, and that approach could have been completely wrong. In fact you could empirically say it *was* wrong, because no studio wanted to make it. I'm well used to making errors of judgement, so that didn't come as a huge surprise to me.

Movie writers supposedly have a hard time dealing with game scripts, some providing movie scripts which have to be modified.



As well as having Garland on board, *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West* has as its dramatic co-director Andy Serkis – also the source of the voice and motion of the lead character

What was your impression of Tameem's script for *Enslaved*?
I think that's a fair comment about movie writers and game scripts. It was certainly true of me. As for Tameem's script, it was structurally all there. He's a gifted and imaginative storyteller, and would work very naturally in the film world. I sort of hope he tries it someday, but in another way I don't think he should, because there may be more interesting things to achieve in the games world.

I guess if I were to make a criticism it would relate to character and consistency. Making sure characters are true to themselves, and true to some kind of larger truth, which relates to the recipients of the narrative. That is to say, the player. Us. For example, I think the first serious discussion we had about the narrative was on the very first day that I, Tameem and the level designers all sat down together. We got to a section where Monkey was walking down a walkway, and he sees an escaping slave trying to pull himself up to the walkway. And instead of helping the guy up, Monkey kicked him in the face and sent him to his death. They thought that projected the idea that Monkey was a badass. Whereas, to me, it projected the idea that Monkey was a bit of a cunt.

I think that highlighted a difference in our approach to character. This is a generalisation, and I know there are plenty of exceptions to the rule, but game design has a tendency to be fast and loose with character, whereas in film and books, character is handled with kid gloves. Ultimately, if you want to be serious about narrative, you have to be serious about character too.

The film critic Roger Ebert has argued that "videogames could not be art", adding after an internet furore that "what I should have said is that games could not be high art, as I understand it".
That's just insane. It's an incredibly stupid thing to say, though I say that without knowing anything about what he said beyond what you've just told me. How could you anticipate where games would be in 30 years? How could you possibly do that? I wouldn't dream of anticipating where films would be in 30 years. I don't even know where they'll be in three years. We're supposed to be making Judge Dredd in 3D, but will that be a bad idea in three years' time? Will the fad be over?

Is that native 3D?
We're planning to shoot in 3D. There's so many reasons why he's wrong. What he's talking about is an artform at a very, very early point in its life. Yes, games have existed since the '70s, but as a forum to explore narrative they've really only existed since the '80s, and even then the narrative form that existed was text-based adventures which were kind of like those 'turn-to-page-30' books. It's just bullshit. It's a stupid, ill-informed thing to say.

Perhaps he's simply frustrated by the increasing influence of games on movies.



It's not uncommon for the worst Hollywood blockbusters to be compared to videogames nowadays.
Yeah, I think that's true. But it's also that the game industry is becoming bigger than the film industry. It's a little bit misleading because if you look at Avatar, there's still no game/social phenomenon that's the equivalent of Avatar. But you still can't deny the popular culture clout the game industry has.

I would argue – and I really would argue – that games, in some respects, have elements of high art in them already. I could start to sound very pretentious so I'll be careful, and again it's subjective. But there's something about the way I feel when I play games like *Rez* – I just adore that game – or *Tempest 2000*, which has a particular kind of hold on me, where there's something oddly transcendent about it. Now that's sort of what art's all about, isn't it? Some sort of transcendence?

That said, I wouldn't want to let games off the hook. Games can and will be high art. I don't think *Rez* is Hamlet, but I think Hamlet will one day exist in games. Other people might not like Hamlet and prefer *Rez* instead. That's fine. What I do think, though, is that the games industry has some very serious problems to address. It seems to me that what's happened is that in its organic development, it has leapfrogged some key stages and has jumped straight to bloated Hollywood megabucks, mega-resources-type products. That's really dangerous. I say that from the point of view of someone who has an agenda, because I work in the film industry and struggle constantly with the consequences of these things within film – how you get finance, how you actually make a film while dealing with an industry that, in some ways, is only seriously interested in big franchise movies. Dredd we're going to try to make for $30 million. Studios don't want to make films for $30 million, they want to make them for $200 million for all sorts of reasons.

What I fear about the game industry is that it has closed out the equivalent of the low-budget end. So when games like *Braid* come along, or apps, I spend more time playing those than I do bigger productions. Because there's something about that garage feel that I really respond to. I like that cheaper end. It reminds me of Matthew Smith and *Manic Miner* – you feel like that still exists there in a way.

It seems to me that it's going to be very, very hard for the game equivalent of Taxi Driver to exist, because I don't know where the niche for it is. I don't know how it'll get financed, and I'm also not sure who'll buy it. You have a hope with these things that, like Kevin Costner in that Field Of Dreams movie, if you build it they will come, but unfortunately that's not true. I thought *Ico* was a very good game but it didn't feel like people came to that.

Part of the problem is that they often come in week 14 of release while publishers and retailers are obsessed with week one.
Just like films. There's huge analogies – and also with books. That will change because people, very soon, will stop buying games like that. The portals, presumably, will be Xbox Live, iTunes and Steam. But there's a creative issue there. There are these irreducible things. If you're making something which costs $120 million, you have to sell a lot of units or you'll never get the chance to do it again. And you have to *look* as though you'll sell a lot of units or no one will give you $120 million. The imbalance that creates, the way it'll suck creativity towards that end, I find a bit depressing.

Where Ebert might be right is that it's not that games don't have the potential to be high art, but something might stop them from ever achieving that. I don't think that will happen – these things have a way of working themselves out in the long run. But the fact of the matter is that right now, you and some friends can get hold of a video camera and a Mac with a copy of Final Cut Pro, go out there and shoot a film, edit it and release it, and you could do that for $15,000. You could *really* do it for £250,000 – and people do do it, and get released at the cinema – London To Brighton is an example – and they do really well, make their money back and go on to make bigger movies. And when that £250,000 film is done, or something bigger like maybe Juno, you could put it up in a multiplex alongside Clash Of The Titans and it'll hold its own. As far as a person walking into the cinema is concerned, they're not really thinking about the budget of the film, they're just thinking, 'I want to see that one'.

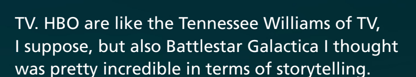
In my working life in film, we've been attempting to exploit that. But I don't know how you'd do that with games, because you cannot get the equivalent production value on a game for that level of money because you don't have the artists and programmers. A shot of a street is a shot of a street; it doesn't matter how much money you've got. It's the same street. Nothing betrays its budget.

> "I've been gaming my whole life. If people don't find games interesting I get irritated with them. It's like saying you're not interested in books"

Another issue would be score aggregators, which place very real, often financial, importance on review scores. They're frequently called a corrupting influence.
Corruption is definitely the word. Wherever there's money to be made there's corruption. Games would be better off if they don't end up in the same place the movie industry's at when it comes to the relationship between art and commerce. If they could sidestep that, they'd be doing themselves a favour. American television, for example, which one could see as the greatest exemplar of commerce, has actually sidestepped it entirely, and the best filmed drama anywhere, you are likely to find is on US



Enslaved sees strong character Monkey and weak, clever character Trip teaming up to defeat robots left over from a war that has seen much of the human race killed off



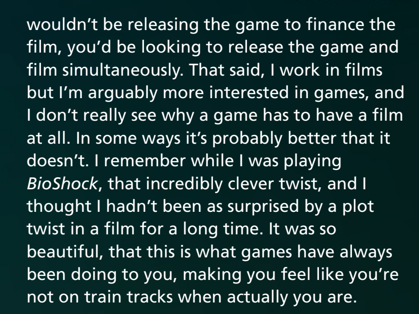
TV. HBO are like the Tennessee Williams of TV, I suppose, but also Battlestar Galactica I thought was pretty incredible in terms of storytelling.

In terms of perception, the name Battlestar Galactica didn't help. It's a hard sell to your partner, for example.
I remember, years ago, trying to explain to a table of my then-girlfriend's trendy friends that Babylon 5 was worth watching. I might as well have emptied a bucket of sick over my head.

It's surprising that J Michael Straczynski hasn't found his way into games.
As someone who's been on the outside of the game industry trying to get in, I can tell you it's bloody difficult. I actually think there's a lot of antagonism between the two industries, partly because film adaptations of games have generally not been good. And game adaptations of films… *GoldenEye*'s a bit of an exception, but then *GoldenEye* really has fuck all to do with that film. Something I've really learned while working on *Enslaved* is that if you're going to make a game of a film currently, the smart thing to do would be to push the button on the game before the film. Because I think games need longer to make than films. You can turn around a film at a high level very quickly, certainly in less than a year. But with a certain kind of game with a certain kind of production value, the construction of the levels, unless you have an *enormous* number of people working concurrently on it, means that you're likely to get a substandard, rushed project.

People have tried without apparent success so far. David Braben wanted to do something similar for *The Outsider*, which has been quiet for a long time, and there was Vin Diesel's *Wheelman*, where the game failed to create demand for a movie.
Vin Diesel, though, he wouldn't be knocking on the door of the industry. The games industry would be interested in attaching Vin Diesel to something, and I can completely understand why. But a film screenwriter offers nothing in marketing terms at all. All you can really do is say to these people that you really love games and have this great idea, at which point their eyes glaze over as they think, 'This guy knows nothing about games'. Which I didn't.

What I'd really want to do at some point is not get involved in a game at what I would see as halfway through, or a third of the way through, but at the inception. And I'd work concurrently on the film at the inception. You would literally begin the game before the film, and you'd fully intend to make the film. You



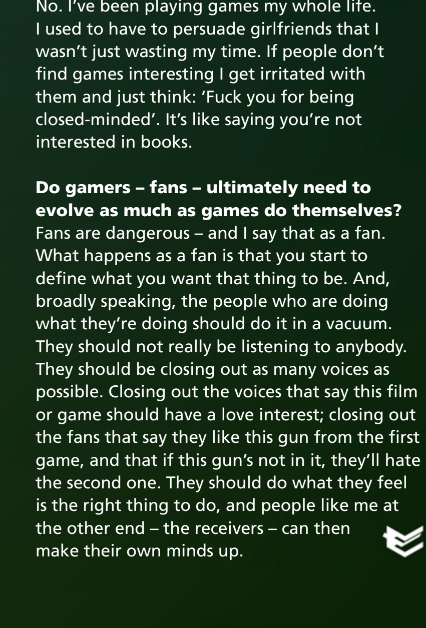
wouldn't be releasing the game to finance the film, you'd be looking to release the game and film simultaneously. That said, I work in films but I'm arguably more interested in games, and I don't really see why a game has to have a film at all. In some ways it's probably better that it doesn't. I remember while I was playing *BioShock*, that incredibly clever twist, and I thought I hadn't been as surprised by a plot twist in a film for a long time. It was so beautiful, that this is what games have always been doing to you, making you feel like you're not on train tracks when actually you are.

Did you have an issue with the ending?
Only one, which was the boss fight. I have a personal hatred of boss fights. This is the kind of thing me and Tameem would sit around arguing about. The big problem games have with narrative is that if you get stuck, it stops being a story with characters and it starts being a problem-solving exercise. For me, boss fights are always problem-solving exercises. I'm just thinking: 'Where's the weak spot?' I've done it so many times that there is no adrenaline for me involved in trying to shoot the metal plate off its arse. I just want him to go away.

I've played through the whole of a game like *Batman: Arkham Asylum* or *Dead Rising*, which I loved, and I've got to fight the Joker or a guy in a tank. Both of those games I put down and never picked up again, because I just cannot be bothered to go through this aching ritual. I see people going on about their favourite boss fights, and I just think: 'Are you insane?'

How about the *Metal Gear Solid* games?
I hate them. That last *Metal Gear Solid* game, I literally threw it across the room, I was so annoyed with it. What I hated were the cutscenes. If I want to see a film, I'll see a film.

Do you ever experience any negative feedback for your love of games?
No. I've been playing games my whole life. I used to have to persuade girlfriends that I wasn't just wasting my time. If people don't find games interesting I get irritated with them and just think: 'Fuck you for being closed-minded'. It's like saying you're not interested in books.



Do gamers – fans – ultimately need to evolve as much as games do themselves?
Fans are dangerous – and I say that as a fan. What happens as a fan is that you start to define what you want that thing to be. And, broadly speaking, the people who are doing what they're doing should do it in a vacuum. They should not really be listening to anybody. They should be closing out as many voices as possible. Closing out the voices that say this film or game should have a love interest; closing out the fans that say they like this gun from the first game, and that if this gun's not in it, they'll hate the second one. They should do what they feel is the right thing to do, and people like me at the other end – the receivers – can then make their own minds up.



RARE VINTAGE

LOOKING BACK OVER 25 YEARS OF GAMES FROM ONE OF BRITAIN'S FOREMOST DEVELOPMENT STUDIOS

Not all company names are so apt. You could point to Rare's very survival as proof – there are few studios formed in the '80s to make it this far, and fewer still which remain at the forefront of the medium. You could point to its legacy, too – not many companies can lay claim to such a wellspring of nostalgia, nor to the lasting impression that games such as *GoldenEye 007* left on the industry as a whole. But Rare was rare from the very outset: founded 25 years ago in Ashby, its very conception was to set it apart from western developers of the time, intended as it was to take advantage of Nintendo's new console.

Studio head **Mark Betteridge** calls it the "big, grey, boxy beauty", and it's clear that the company owes much to the NES. Betteridge estimates that for a period of 18 months, Rare was the only English-speaking company making NES titles, establishing it as the go-to developer for publishers and licensors across the western world. The company's reputation with Nintendo blossomed into a full partnership that would see the creation of Rare's best-loved games – *Donkey Kong Country*, *GoldenEye 007*, *Banjo-Kazooie* and *Perfect Dark*. With its acquisition by Microsoft, Rare has found itself once again in a pioneering role, an essential player in Microsoft's plan to transform Xbox 360 via its Kinect peripheral.

To mark Rare's 25th birthday, we visited the company's sprawling estate in Twyford, barely ten miles from where it first began, the house that Banjo built now residing in a green and pleasant land of duck ponds and well-tended gardens, hemmed in by a high-security fence. Over the next six pages, Rare's long-serving Betteridge, along with executive producer **Nick Burton**, creative director **George Andreas** and head of design **Gregg Mayles**, trawl through the untold stories of its 25 years. The recurring theme is ambition, albeit disguised by googly eyes, puns and collectibles – offset by self-effacing humour.

"If Rare were to be hit by a milk-float tomorrow," we ask, finally, "what would you put on its tombstone?" Mayles is quick with his reply: "Two big eyes on the top." Cheers, Rare. We'll see you at 50.



WIZARDS & WARRIORS

FORMAT: **NES** PUBLISHER: **ACCLAIM** RELEASE: **1987**

Mark Betteridge: This was the game that started Acclaim in the entertainment business. It's also the game with the worst jump animation ever – I know exactly why that is. *Ghosts 'N Goblins* was out on coin-op at the same time, and I remember looking at it and saying: "Wouldn't it be nice if we had a jump like that – that spread-eagled jump?" *Wizards & Warriors* was quite a precise jumping game, so that would be one of the reasons we didn't go for it, but one of the other reasons was that the characters were eight-by-eight sprites – that was the maximum size which would display on a line on that hardware. Otherwise they'd just disappear after eight. If you drew the character any wider then any other characters that were near would disappear when you jumped. That's why he jumped with straight legs.



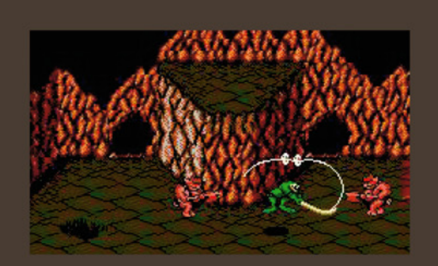


KILLER INSTINCT

FORMAT: **COIN-OP, SNES** PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY, NINTENDO** RELEASE: **1994, 1995**

MB: I was working on *Killer Instinct* as the engineer. It was a dual approach with the new technology – doing a coin-op as well as a console game. It was a time when successful games were film licences and tie-ins and sequels, and we thought if we could establish something with its quality through the coin-op, then we could bring it to the home market without spending millions of dollars on a product we didn't own. *Killer Instinct*'s hardware had only a single processor. There was no graphics hardware, so all the rendering had to be done in software. It was a scary process, that. The whole game was written in assembler with no debugging – we couldn't communicate back from the board to find out why it had crashed.





BATTLETOADS

FORMAT: **NES** PUBLISHER: **TRADEWEST** RELEASE: **1991**

MB: For me, *Battletoads* was a swansong on the NES in the same way that *Donkey Kong Country* was a swansong on the Super NES – what can we squeeze out of the hardware for one last hurrah? So that's why you had the different scroll levels, the parallax levels, the vertical rotating tube. It looked like you were doing things you shouldn't be able to do on that hardware. The end of that first level where you get the boss character, you only see its leg because we couldn't draw anything bigger, and then it switches to the view from the boss itself, and it's firing at you. And that comes from us asking: how can we make this thing look bigger than it actually is? We get a lot of letters about that game. In hindsight, we wish we'd made the third level easier.









DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

FORMAT: **SNES** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** RELEASE: **1994**

MB: Donkey Kong was a dormant character at the time, and Nintendo were looking to bring him back. It's about the time that Nintendo bought a stake in the company – and part of that was due to the level of investment required by that project. We'd been looking at some high-end rendering equipment that was used in the car industry. It was about a quarter of a million pounds for a machine. So we made the move to buy one of those machines and render some artwork on there. We were doing *Killer Instinct* at the time as a coin-op game and Mr Miyamoto was over. We showed him TJ Combo on the SGI machine, and he said: "It looks good, but how will it look on the SNES?" That wasn't trivial – we had to make some software to convert it from 16 million colours into 16.
Gregg Mayles: But Nintendo were really impressed by what they'd seen. *Aladdin* was out on the Mega Drive and it had really good graphics. Nintendo said: "We want a game that looks better than that using your new technology and using Donkey Kong." Apart from Donkey Kong himself, we created everything else. Originally we were going to use Donkey Kong Jr as Donkey Kong's sidekick, but we'd reimagined him as what became Diddy. They weren't happy with that; they wanted him to look more like Donkey Kong in a nappy. But we wanted something a bit more dynamic, something that could jump around – so we went with our new character, but decided to call him something else. We had all sorts of names – he was Dinky Kong for ages but when we went to trademark it we got in trouble with the toy manufacturers. But the thing I really remember from that project was the immense struggle of reducing the massive SGI-rendered images to a really small size. I remember sleepless nights, wrestling with it. It was like a giant jigsaw puzzle. All the levels were designed on Post-it notes and stuck together. I've still got them all. We'd come up with ideas for a level – say, swinging ropes – and come up with as many variations of that as we could, draw them all out on Post-it notes and stick them together in the order we wanted them to be used, and then basically draw bits of scenery to connect them together. That's how every single level was designed.



GOLDENEYE 007

FORMAT: **N64** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** RELEASE: **1997**

MB: When Nintendo asked if we wanted to do it, we said, "Well, not really." It wasn't something we were really doing – we were trying to build our own IP, and film tie-ins meant a lot of ownership by the film company. But Nintendo was very keen. When we originally did the contract, we were meant to be out close to the film's release. We not only missed that, but the home release, and the BBC-film-at-midnight release. We got a letter from Nintendo saying we should cancel it, but we just never told the team.
GM: We went to E3 at the same time as one of our other games and that was getting loads of attention while *GoldenEye* just had all these empty stands with attendants looking round, desperate for anyone to play it. We thought, 'Oh, God, here we go – this is going to be a disaster. Thank God we've got Banjo.' Then, as it was, *GoldenEye* sold several times more. Usually, when our games come out, we never play them again. You've worked on them for so long that you just don't want to see them. But *GoldenEye* – a bunch of us used to play it every lunchtime without fail. We'd eat our sandwiches as quickly as possible. I think we stopped playing it after seven years.
George Andreas: Internally, while *GoldenEye* was being produced, there wasn't an awful lot of faith in the game around the company apart from the core members of that team. We were on a different team at the time, and I remember you could just hear rumours the project wasn't going very well. I saw the game at various stages during its development, and I think, about four months before release, I saw a build of it and I thought, 'Jesus Christ, it's a bit of a mess.' But then it all came together very close to the end.
MB: We never put the multiplayer in until two years after we were meant to have finished it. It was quite a different game to start off with: an on-rails shooter. But then we figured out a control mechanism that worked. We had a nice demo early on, where you had a character onscreen and you could and shoot them in a particular part of the body and they would react. We thought: 'Hmm! That's pretty satisfying.' And it started to give the player a bit more accuracy with the sniper rifles. Being able to move in stealthily and take someone down how you wanted – it was that freedom side of it that slowed the pace of the game down.









BLAST CORPS

FORMAT: **N64** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** RELEASE: **1997**

GM: [Rare co-founder] Chris Stamper was working on an arcade concept, called *Diggers* or something like that. It had these mechanical JCBs that you could control, almost like *Killer Instinct* fighters. You'd be swinging shovels around and hitting each other. The development process was literally: 'Let's smash some things up – how can we do that?' It was quite the opposite with *Banjo* where, once we got the idea, we quickly arrived at a plan for the entire game. I think that's pretty indicative of the teams we have at Rare – each has their own flavour and style of working.
GA: There's always been a very competitive element between the teams, too. Everybody wanted to outdo each other. If you heard another project wasn't going so well, you'd be like, "Great! We're going to beat them!" But it was good, it was healthy.



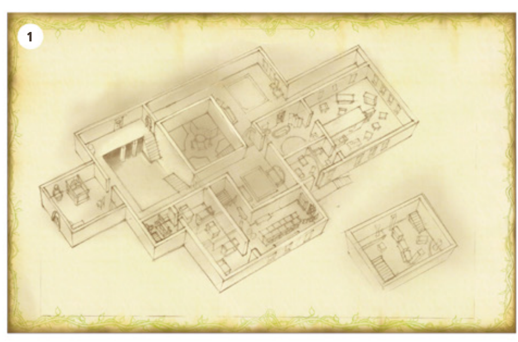


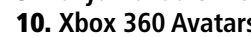


BANJO-KAZOOIE

FORMAT: **N64** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** RELEASE: **1998**

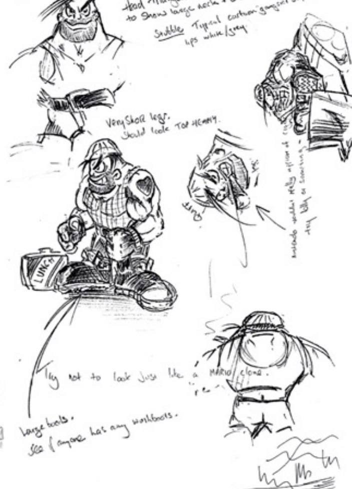
GM: It started off as *Project Dream*. We wanted to do a *Zelda*-esque game with the new technology [used in *DKC*]. But it was right at the end of the SNES's lifespan, so that plan lasted for little more than a couple of screenshots before we moved on to what was then the Ultra 64. It became clear we couldn't have the same 2D look, so we had this proprietary 3D mesh system, a precursor to a proper polygonal engine. We had a boy character with a sword – this average kid who got pulled into a magical adventure, fighting against pirates – but they all quickly disappeared, apart from the main antagonist, Blackheart, who pops up in the *Banjo* games. The boy just didn't fit, so we experimented with other characters. We had a rabbit for about three days before we decided he had to go. The last character we came up with was a bear wearing a backpack.
MB: *Banjo* was a bit like a character we'd had in *Donkey Kong* before Donkey Kong. It wasn't the same character, but he was a bear. And the thing about the backpack: we'd been in Japan for a show and a lot of kids were wearing backpacks just like that. Almost a vinyl shiny material. They made it over here a year or two later, but then, in Japan, all these kids of school age were wearing them as fashion items.
GM: We got to the point with the proprietary engine where we just couldn't make it work – it was pushing the hardware too much. We tried to simplify, making it a 2D game like *Donkey Kong*, but with some 3D depth so you'd have choices to make. But then *Mario 64* came along, and we thought: 'Ah. Back to the drawing board we go.' So we scrapped everything we had, rewrote our engine, and retained the *Banjo* character. Kazooie came along later. One of the things we wanted was a double-jump, but it looked weird. Someone suggested that a pair of wings should pop out of Banjo's backpack to give him the extra boost. Then a little later on we realised that the bear had to run faster because it was taking ages to get around the levels – so we had these legs pop out of his backpack. We put two and two together. That's how Kazooie was born. And after that it was like pushing the boulder down a hill. The rest of the game was built around the character's abilities. I think we spent about 16 months on *Dream* and then we swapped to *Banjo* – it only took about 14 months from start to finish, including actually writing the 3D engine as well.

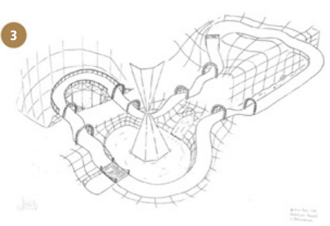


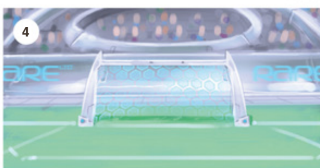



1. ***Grabbed By The Ghoulies***
2. ***Blast Corps***
3. ***Diddy Kong Racing***
4. ***Kinect Sports***
5. ***Star Fox Adventures***
6. ***Banjo-Kazooie* (née '*Dream*')**
7. ***Kameo: Elements Of Power***
8. ***Perfect Dark Zero***
9. ***Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts***
10. Xbox 360 Avatars





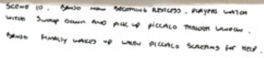








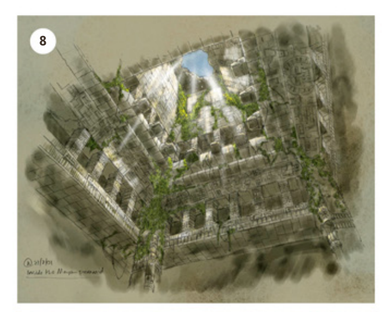


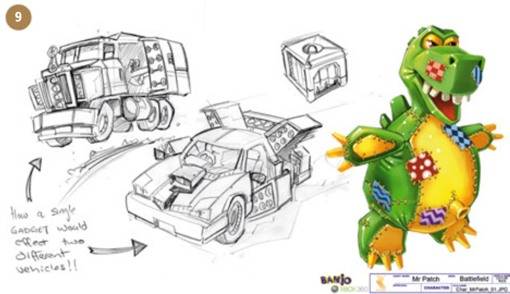






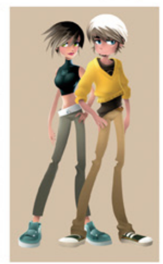


















my place



JET FORCE GEMINI

FORMAT: **N64** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** RELEASE: **1999**

GA: At the end of *Jet Force*, didn't Tim [Stamper] suggest going round the levels to collect all the Tribals?
GM: That was something we had planned for the first *Banjo*. The witch was originally supposed to turn Banjo's sister into a frog, and Banjo would then have had to go round all the levels again. But we thought we'd never get it done in time.
GA: Probably a good thing we didn't.
GM: But we just put it into *Jet Force* instead.
GA: Much to the chagrin of some players, no doubt.
GM: If you plotted a graph of our collectibles, I wonder at which point we should have stopped. I think we reached the peak of collecting with *Dinosaur Planet* [AKA *Star Fox Adventures*]. After *Banjo* we came up with something called *Supercollector* in which the entire object of the game was just collecting things.





CONKER'S BAD FUR DAY

FORMAT: **N64** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** RELEASE: **2001**

MB: We'd go for anything, including ourselves – but [certain licensors] didn't see it that way: "We'd prefer it if you didn't do that. We appreciate that it *is* quite funny, but it's not really in our strategy." I remember when we demoed it to Nintendo, to Mr Arakawa [Nintendo founder] and Howard Lincoln who was president at the time – it was a scene in which Conker pisses all over these fire monsters. Mr Arakawa was cracking up, but Howard Lincoln, who's like this Harvard lawyer, was sitting there going: "I'm not sure I find this funny." I found it funny that he didn't find it funny. So there was a thing with M-rated games with Nintendo. Even when we had *GoldenEye* there was a lot of resistance to blood or injury. At one point, the ending featured all the characters hugging each other – they're all right really! It was like panto.

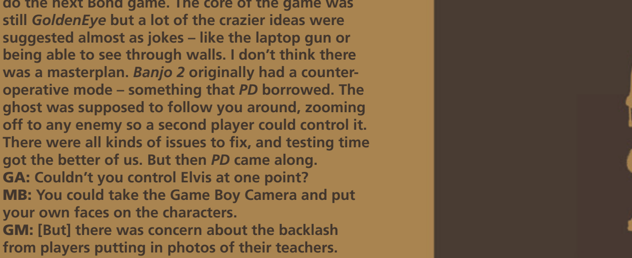


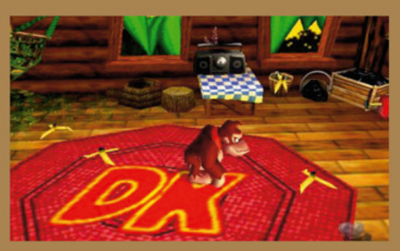
PERFECT DARK

FORMAT: **N64** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** RELEASE: **2000**

GM: We wanted to push our own IP rather than do the next Bond game. The core of the game was still *GoldenEye* but a lot of the crazier ideas were suggested almost as jokes – like the laptop gun or being able to see through walls. I don't think there was a masterplan. *Banjo 2* originally had a counter-operative mode – something that *PD* borrowed. The ghost was supposed to follow you around, zooming off to any enemy so a second player could control it. There were all kinds of issues to fix, and testing time got the better of us. But then *PD* came along.
GA: Couldn't you control Elvis at one point?
MB: You could take the Game Boy Camera and put your own faces on the characters.
GM: [But] there was concern about the backlash from players putting in photos of their teachers.







DONKEY KONG 64

FORMAT: **N64** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** RELEASE: **1999**

MB: Didn't you do the rap, George?
GA: Did you have to bring that up? It was myself and Chris Sutherland – who was also the voice of *Killer Instinct* and *Banjo*. He's very mild mannered, but the moment you get him in a recording studio he completely changes personality. He turned into gangsta rap man, moving around the studio doing all the gangsta hand gestures. The rap probably went on a little longer than it should have done. After the game was released, I was going down the escalator in Schwartz, the big toy shop in New York, and I could hear the DK rap. I was like: 'Oh, God – it's followed me here.' But it was actually great – there were a bunch of families round the N64 and the kids were all dancing and clapping their hands. I breezed past and took the escalator to the next floor.







STAR FOX ADVENTURES

FORMAT: **GAMECUBE** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** RELEASE: **2002**

MB: To start off with it was called *Dinosaur Planet*. It'd been around for a while, and we were kind of on the money in thinking that dinosaurs had been forgotten about and were due a comeback in popular culture. Jurassic Park came out quite near to the start of development, which was obviously huge. It was Nintendo that suggested we use the Star Fox character – they felt he could be a character outside of his craft. I think he fitted OK, although a lot of Star Fox fans would probably have preferred a *Star Fox* style of game. But I think you'd obviously realise what it was while looking at it. I don't think people would dislike what we did with the character in terms of how he moved and what he looked like in the game – but I guess people who like space shooters do like space shooters.



GRABBED BY THE GHOULIES

FORMAT: **XBOX** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** RELEASE: **2003**

GM: The transition between GameCube and Xbox hardware was a bit of hiccup, but it wasn't too bad. By that point *Ghoulies* was what it was – a game for the GameCube, and very much the Nintendo market. And suddenly it was on the Xbox and with a very different market. We tried to react to that and make the game a bit more appealing to that audience. And we achieved some of it, but if we'd had a bit longer we could have taken a lot more steps to make it more in line with what the Xbox audience was at the time.
GA: [The Microsoft deal] happened relatively quickly. It was generally supported company-wide as well. No one was that unhappy that we'd gone with Microsoft.
GM: We got [angry] letters every step of the way. Once they got email, it was like opening the floodgates.
MB: We still get them now.





IT'S MR PANTS

FORMAT: **GBA** PUBLISHER: **THQ** RELEASE: **2004**

GM: That must take the record for the most game names ever. It was called *Splodge*, then it was *Nutcracker*, then it was *Animal Crackers*. It was called *Sunflower* at one point. Donkey Kong fit the bill nicely, and it was all themed with kremlings and barrels when, with the transition to Microsoft, suddenly we couldn't use Donkey Kong any more. We had to go back to square one. We looked through all our IPs and none of them seemed to fit – so we figured why not go with Mr Pants from the website [where he was a mascot]? And as soon as we decided that, the childish art style flowed from it. We had artists drawing with their left hands to make the characters look genuinely bad. But by that point our cheeky innuendo-based humour had sort of passed its sell-by date. We were all growing up as well – to a degree.









From top: Nick Burton, executive producer of technology and communications; Mark Betteridge, studio head; George Andreas, creative director; Gregg Mayles, head of design

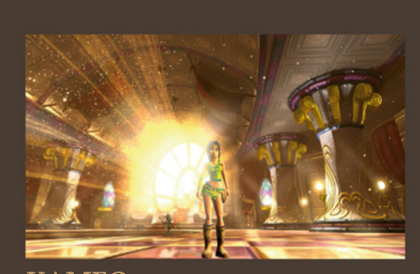


PERFECT DARK ZERO

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** RELEASE: **2005**

GM: It was fairly late on in development that we knew it was going to be a 360 launch title. I think it's probably fair to say that the transition between Xbox and 360 took longer than from the GameCube to the original Xbox. It seemed to affect us more. I think it's because the jump in fidelity was larger and with the projects being closer to completion it took a lot more to redo the assets and get them up to the level that was required of the new hardware. It's very rare that you get a game that just works, that's a breeze to develop from start to finish. There are pains along the way – some minor, some fairly severe – up to the point where you just scrap it or start again with a different set of people. *PDZ* was probably somewhere in between.





KAMEO: ELEMENTS OF POWER

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** RELEASE: **2005**

GA: I was on that project from start to finish, so it's quite painful to talk about it in some ways. It started as a GameCube project, and it was actually one of the games we demoed at E3 along with the hardware. And then it jumped from GameCube on to Xbox. We changed direction slightly because of the new audience we were trying to aim at. We called Kameo an elf, but really she was a fairy. We tried to disguise that a few times, but it didn't really work out. It was a game with a fairy for an audience that likes shooting and killing things. In hindsight it probably would have been best to scrap everything and start again. And then we jumped on to 360 as a launch title. We weren't far off finishing [when that happened]. But sales-wise it was pretty healthy.







BANJO-KAZOOIE: NUTS & BOLTS

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** RELEASE: **2008**

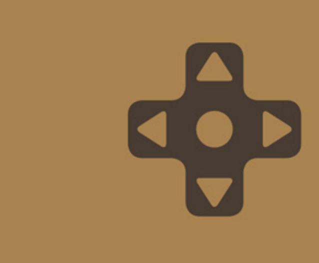
GM: It began as a reworking of the first *Banjo* game. Then *Conker: Live & Reloaded* came out and didn't have the reception we'd hoped. It made us take a second look. User-generated content was the big new buzzword, and so we were wondering if we could put some of the design in the players' hands. A lot of the jokes in the game were directed at *Ghoulies*, which hadn't been as successful as we'd wanted. But rather than never mention its name again, we thought: 'Let's have a bit of fun.' So you'd come across a dustbin and it'd be full of copies of *Ghoulies*. I think if we'd had a Red Ring Of Death in [the Logbox 720 level], we might have got into a bit of trouble, but we were very aware we were treading a fine line. There was nothing malevolent about it. We just thought a level set inside a computer was a good idea.



VIVA PIÑATA

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** RELEASE: **2006**

GM: It started off life on a Microsoft PDA device, the idea being that you would text animals to each other. We'd played *Animal Crossing* and *Harvest Moon*, and we wanted to do our own take on that, based on a food chain. We had a huge board covered in Post-it notes, all these animals joined by lines. So we did have some dark things to deal with, like death – and sex, too, or the 'romance dance' that it turned into. We had many different ways of dealing with death, as I remember. Some of them were really quite vicious. We had animals being beaten apart with shovels and eaten. In the end they get broken, they float outside, then they reform and run off – so you never actually lose them. But originally they'd get smashed up in the garden and all the other animals would come in and eat every single bit.





XBOX 360 AVATARS

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** RELEASE: **2008**

GM: The original pitch was to do with MSN Messenger. Having a representation of who you were talking to.
GA: We started with that, but then there was a space which people could go and interact with each other. It was a much bigger vision for the whole system around Avatars. We were bashing [Microsoft's] door down.
GM: It wasn't until the 360 came out that the idea stuck.
GA: I think you'll find it was after the Wii came out.
Nick Burton: The Avatars look inhumanly proportioned because they have these very big hands, feet and heads. But the skeleton underneath is actually in proportion – almost. There was a little bit of tweaking in order to get the one-to-one body coordination [with Kinect].
GA: The Kinect titles use Avatars which are slightly differently proportioned, but if you were to put them side-by-side you wouldn't notice it.







KINECT SPORTS

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** RELEASE: **2010**

GM: It's been one of the biggest design challenges for as long as I can remember. It's been a real eye-opener and re-education.
GA: We went over to see Kinect, called Project Natal back then. Really early hardware, held together with sticky tape. [Kinect lead] Kudo Tsunoda was ringing us up and saying: "You've got to come over and look at this thing." He was trying to get support internally to get the project off the ground. And we looked at some of the early demos, and threw some questions round. We were amazed by the potential, but what we had seen didn't realise that potential, and it wasn't until the flight home when we were chatting that it sank in. We were absolutely adamant that we needed a button, something with haptic feedback, that would initiate an action. It took a long time – we threw some prototypes together and then we saw you didn't need one. And we were very vocal to Kudo at the time, and Peter Molyneux was as well, that you needed something in your hand. It was a challenge to rein some of the designers in. You end up falling back on the [gamepad] control scheme. It's a crutch, really.
NB: One of the first things one of the designers did was get a controller and map the buttons of the controller to different parts of the space in front of him. That was: "Yep, that's not going to work."
GA: We've had [hundreds of prototypes], everything from flying a kite to flapping your arms and flying.
NB: There's a seagull pooping game.
GM: Our challenge as designers is to imagine how we can use it. Before *GoldenEye* came out people were saying you couldn't have firstperson shooters on consoles. Before that people said you couldn't have games outside of an arcade.
GA: And "you can't do a 3D platformer."
GM: The initial reaction to the Wii was pretty vitriolic from everyone. It's just a challenge to me. That's why we do the job we do. Before I retire, I'd like to have a go at every single genre out there. If you keep doing the same thing over and over again, yes, it gets better, but we're all aware we've only got a certain amount of time in the industry and you've got to make every day count and make a difference.


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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Dragon Quest IX



Fighting an evil curse with a Texan drawl; saving Welsh villagers from a giant fish: Yuji Horii's latest epic is packed with sweetly silly stories and bags of well-localised charm.
DS, NINTENDO

Skate 3

It was all so chilled-out until our Christ Air over a war memorial as Isaac Clarke. Probably our biggest gaming faux pas of the year, apart from some *Red Dead* lasso antics.
360, PS3, EA

StarCraft II: Wings Of Liberty



Our APM isn't anything to write home about yet, but we've got the bug, and Silver League is learning the true meaning of siege mode. We won't mention our win ratio.
PC. BLIZZARD

Who is Jumpman?

Do characters get in the way of a good story?



Exceptions, of course, prove the rule: *Metal Gear Solid*'s appropriation of historical events and iconography when presenting 'Snake' across eras, like *Peace Walker*'s none-too-subtle Che Guevara references, tie in with the gameplay

The key phrase in *Metroid: Other M*'s pre-release marketing campaign has been 'Who is Samus Aran?' Given that Samus is the lead character in one of the great videogame series, it's strange that question doesn't seem too interesting. The character's notable for being gaming's first mainstream female lead, true, but *Metroid*'s popularity has little to do with that: the game's defined by her abilities rather than those flowing blonde locks.

Giving the lead character more of a personality is inevitable in such a long-running series. It's not without risk: surely videogame movies have such a bad track record because their characters aren't interesting enough to carry a summer blockbuster? (The *Gears Of War* graphic novel that recently turned up in the office doesn't change things, incidentally.)

There are characters like Indiana Jones and then there are characters like Samus. One is a defined personality, and one is a defined set of powers and a visual style. The latter is clearly perfect for videogames when they're being videogames, but when they're not – when you're watching a cutscene, or reading a tie-in novel – then it begins to fall short.

Mario doesn't really have a character at all: he can be a tennis player one day, doctor or driver the next. The 'personality' of a videogame avatar has little to do with a coherent mental character, and everything to do with physical characteristics. Who is Samus Aran? Samus Aran has an awesome powersuit and shoots aliens. Does that answer the question?

Games are interactive; storytelling is passive. More and more games are using tricks like ambient soundbites, found objects and even the trusty old wall of graffiti, but narrative is still subservient to cutscenes. *Other M* makes the mistake of assuming the character matters as much as what you do with the avatar, and uses too much screen time for unsophisticated movies.

Other M's story-driven approach isn't the disaster we once feared (previous experience with Team Ninja character exposition leaves a mark), but it would be wrong to think it adds anything much to the game. Who is Samus Aran? Despite enjoying *Other M*, we still don't much care: we're just glad she can still do Shinespark.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



METROID: OTHER M

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 3 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO/TEAM NINJA
PREVIOUSLY IN: E204, E213, E217







Every so often you're locked into a firstperson view until you spy a particular scenery detail. A weird mix of spot the hidden object and *Prime*'s scanning mode, these interludes are inoffensive but don't add much to the experience

Since *Other M*'s announcement, there's only been one question worth asking: which Team Ninja is going to turn up? The fine-tuning master of virtual combat, the crummy level designer or the clown behind lascivious minigame collections? Time to relax: it's the first, and *Other M* is a collaboration that works. It has all the hallmarks of *Metroid*: a sprawling space station, an upgrade path, plenty of puzzles and a forgiving approach to platforming. But here it's combined with one of the best boss lineups Samus has ever faced, the highpoints for the kind of elegant and aggressive combat system you feel *Metroid*'s always been waiting for.

Nintendo has got the best from Team Ninja, but it's also gone back to its 2D roots after the singular 3D take of the *Prime* series. *Other M* is traditional and – most unusually – a 3D game that abandons analogue controls. You play the majority with the Wii Remote held sideways, not a configuration we've ever had any kind of fondness for, and control Samus with movement in eight directions.

> An endgame gauntlet, facing down about 30 opponents in a row, shows the combat system can shine under the most intense pressure

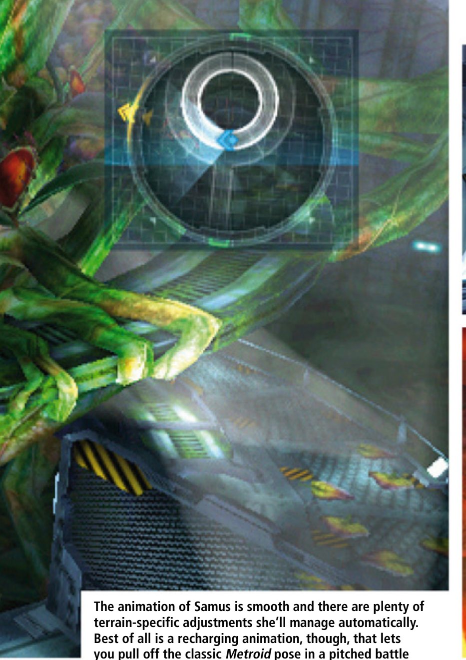
It works because the world's built for it. *Other M*'s Bottle Ship is an atmospheric and varied setting, but its layout is flatpack: plenty of long corridors, both horizontal and vertical, with bigger rooms essentially large boxes. Recall the map screen of any 2D *Metroid*, though, and this is pretty much what they've always been like, and the detailed environments give each chunk its own identity.

In terms of how Samus is funnelled from A to B, the closest comparison is the GBA's excellent *Metroid Fusion* (which the storyline of *Other M* sets up): the narrative thread and pull of objectives is strong, but in *Other M*'s second half is dissipated over a re-exploration of earlier areas for the hidden goodies. Clearing out rooms of enemies usually shows up a glowing blue dot, temptingly near but confusingly squirrelled away, and when you're blasting back through later these treasure hunts swallow hours.

That it's a pleasure simply exploring is thanks to the combat system, and a bespoke take on the firstperson perspective. The punch-ups first, then, and Team Ninja's contribution: Samus has always been powerful, but you wouldn't call the fighting in previous *Metroid* games aggressive, or violent. *Other M*'s about close-quarters combat. Tapping a direction just before an enemy attack hits executes a dodge, and successful dodges boost the charge rate of Samus' shots; charged shots, in turn, are more likely to disable enemies for an uncompromising finisher. The timing required for dodges, and the perfect 'shunk' noise from the Remote when a shot's fully charged, is a feedback loop of real finesse. When mastered, it makes Samus about as brutal as a Nintendo character's ever likely to get, and an endgame gauntlet of standard enemies, facing down about 30 opponents in a row, shows that it can shine under the most intense pressure.



The grappling hook is used to navigate later areas where there isn't much floor, and certainly looks the part, but routes are straightforward. On the plus side, it does a nice line in hooking monsters



The animation of Samus is smooth and there are plenty of terrain-specific adjustments she'll manage automatically. Best of all is a recharging animation, though, that lets you pull off the classic *Metroid* pose in a pitched battle



Someone at Nintendo HQ is a big fan of *Dead Space*. *Other M* isn't quite doing the same thing as Visceral's game, but certain set-pieces and little camera tricks remind you unmistakably of being on the Ishimura



The morph ball perhaps needs a little jazzing up: it does all the usual things in *Other M*, which is to say it's an essential and fun tool throughout, but it's not the most exciting part of Samus' armoury. We can't remember the last time a morph ball solution came as a surprise

It's a big part of why *Other M*'s bosses, a wonderful collection of B-movie freaks and industrial horrors, are such high points. Several owe more to *Ninja Gaiden* than *Metroid*s past, but they're all stern workouts and add schlocky pizzazz to the rogues gallery. Ridley, a big lava worm, an industrial vehicle, a green-faced flying mech, the space-station-sized final encounter – all fantastic. These encounters also play with perspective, demanding firstperson switches at critical moments or bringing down the house while you're trying to aim at a weak spot. Throughout the majority of *Other M* you can smoothly transition into a standing firstperson view by pointing the Remote at the screen – which helps greatly with working out routes and admiring the details. In harried circumstances it can be more difficult to use, which is exactly why the game keeps demanding it.

The problems *Other M* does have are minor ones. The challenge could be fiercer: truly testing enemies are only found in the last stretch, and you'll often sprint through old locations simply tapping fire without any sense of danger. You'll come across a few invisible walls while poking around the space station's corners, and most players will feel that Metroids themselves don't make enough of a showing. The cutscenes are of very variable quality, and as for the MacGuffin that means Samus's suit has all its abilities but she'll only use them when 'authorised' to… well, it's a bit rubbish.

Other M dabbles in cinematic tricks and sensational set-pieces, but its strength is in the foundations: it builds an enveloping 3D world from straight lines and right angles, and ups the gears of its rewarding basics constantly. It offers an uncluttered slice of sci-fi action, a singular take on the thirdperson adventure, and a combat system of pared-down beauty. Team Ninja had good material to work with, but the studio's own contribution is a fine complement indeed. **[8]**

LA Galaxy



Series co-creator Yoshio Sakamoto talked up *Other M*'s narrative a great deal before release and, given that *Metroid* is about energy-sucking blobs being fought by a power-suited bounty hunter, it's not bad. There's a bunch of mercs on the Bottle Ship along with Samus, and as they explore it becomes clear something nasty's going on – they soon start falling like skittles, which makes it feel like old Star Trek, but what David Beckham's doing in a lead role is anyone's guess. *Other M* explores Samus' early career and paternal relationship with her commander: the cutscenes are a bit too long, but there's an affecting ending. Whether you constantly need the goon squad chipping in is another matter. In a universe like that of *Metroid*, too many supporting characters detract from the atmosphere rather than cultivating it.



VALKYRIA CHRONICLES 2

FORMAT: **PSP** RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER 3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**









For a handheld title, *VC2* can be over-laborious. There's no instant restart option: you must 'resign' a battle, reselect it from the briefing screen and redeploy your squad. A process which takes two minutes, 18 button presses, and three loading screens at our count

It's easy to imagine *Valkyria Chronicles 2* feeling a little insulted. The first *Valkyria Chronicles* was a beautiful, underrated blend of turn-based strategy and realtime mechanics, and went on to build a dedicated fanbase on PS3. Its sequel, however, has had to endure the most dispiriting of snubs. Not the transfer to PSP (though the move hasn't gone as smoothly as it could) but a rather more elementary insult – it's been sent back to school.

It's all gone a bit Harry Potter in Sega's strategy sequel, as the classroom-sized cast of *Valkyria Chronicles 2* juggles the trials and tribulations of blossoming teenage love affairs, cliquey high-school politics and cramming for end-of-term exams while also forming the vanguard of their country's defence against a home-grown rebel insurgency. Taking place two years after the first game, in which the small nation of Gallia was invaded by its Imperial neighbours, *VC2* sees the plucky heroes of Class G facing off against the Gallian Revolutionary Army, a band of aristocrats hoping to depose Gallia's supposedly racially impure leader.

Combat is fundamentally unchanged from the first game. When a turn begins, players select units from a strategic, overhead view. Once a unit's been selected, you control it directly, running to cover and popping out to fire in a thirdperson mode. A pool of 'command points' determines how many moves you can make per turn, and a depleting gauge of 'action points' limits how far a unit can travel in a single move. Units can fire only once per move, but there's nothing stopping you manoeuvring a sniper into an advantageous position and using all your command points on taking out an entire enemy platoon. It's just as satisfying and flexible a system as it was in the series debut – the problem is, this time round it has much less room to breathe.

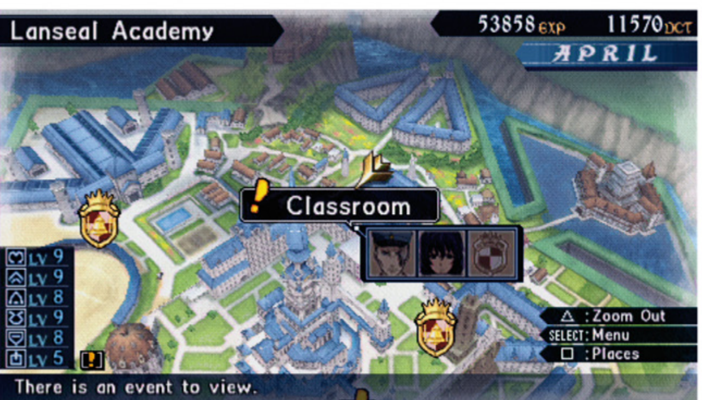
The shift to PSP has necessitated the breaking up of Gallia's battlefields into much smaller chunks, connected by encampments which can be captured by either side – wrest control of an enemy base in one area and you'll be able to start deploying troops in the next. While this does allow for some dramatic reversals in the tide of battle, as you suddenly find yourself able to drop troops behind enemy lines, it also means that *Valkyria Chronicles 2*'s battles feel cramped and bitty when compared to the scope and scale of the original game. This is a problem compounded by *VC2*'s stricter cap on unit numbers. Once you've divided the maximum number of six units across three different parts of a level, your tactical options in any one area become increasingly constrained. The result is a game which doesn't feel as if it's been streamlined for handheld as much as chopped up to fit inside one. To make matters worse, the game demands you play on the same maps time and time again – with little else but variations in enemy placement and slightly reworked objectives to mark missions apart.



There's nothing stopping you manoeuvring a sniper into an advantageous position and using all your command points on taking out an entire platoon



The vehicles of Gallia all share this glowing-blue weakspot on their behinds, which the lancer class can exploit with a precision rocket. Mind the front end, however, as a well-aimed mortar blast can take out multiple soldiers







Attacking from behind results in a *Metal Gear*-esque exclamation mark and bonus damage. It's hard to judge, however, how close you can creep before enemy soldiers will turn around



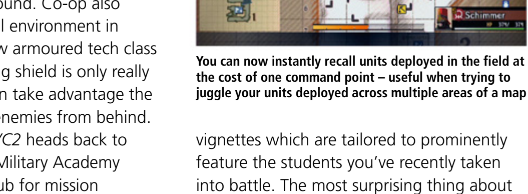


While level design has been the major loser in the format switch, it's not the only one. The original *Valkyria Chronicles*' visuals perfectly captured its fantastical, alternate '30s setting, with pencil outlines overlaying a world coloured in gentle pastel shades. *VC2* keeps the colour scheme, but without the hand-drawn aesthetic those soft hues can often look bland.

With the move to PSP hardware having come at these costs, it falls to *Valkyria Chronicles 2*'s new ad-hoc multiplayer modes to justify the switch to the platform. Versus mode naturally offers a challenge well beyond that of the limited AI, but it's the new co-op which continues the series tradition of experimentation with the traditional turn-based formula – by removing the stipulation that you and your friends take turns at all. With you and up to three friends running around the battlefield in realtime, attacks must be co-ordinated while under enemy fire. Attack an enemy while standing next to an ally and your friend can provide 'covering' fire – doubling the effectiveness of your attacks over a round. Co-op also provides the most useful environment in which to deploy the new armoured tech class – whose bullet-deflecting shield is only really of use when a friend can take advantage the distraction to take out enemies from behind.

Between missions, *VC2* heads back to the classroom. Lanseal Military Academy functions as a central hub for mission selection, weapons research, squad levelling and character development (see 'School daze'), with the day-to-day life of Lanseal's students playing out in a series of optional vignettes which are tailored to prominently feature the students you've recently taken into battle. The most surprising thing about these story segments is the maturity of their themes, addressing issues as diverse as sexuality, racism, politics and the ethics of military service in a manner which, while entirely superficial, manages to avoid syrupy melodrama or patronising didacticism. These sections, however, contain none of school-sim aspects of the *Persona* games from which they're inspired, and it's all too easy to find yourself ignoring all but the essential scenes.

With *Peace Walker* having so recently demonstrated what can be done when a complex, home console series is carefully adapted to PSP, *Valkyria Chronicles 2* feels like a missed opportunity. Its battle system still provides an excellent alternative to the rigid chess boards of many a strategy RPG, but one which feels compromised rather than optimised for its new setting. There's nothing wrong with heading back to school, of course, but *Valkyria Chronicles* was already qualified. **[6]**


You can now instantly recall units deployed in the field at the cost of one command point – useful when trying to juggle your units deployed across multiple areas of a map



Glowing V2 units have a powered shield and laser rifle, the latter of which can tear through a unit in seconds. Locating and destroying the power supply hidden in any level in which they appear can reduce their capabilities

School daze



Between battles, the menu-cum-hub which is Lanseal Academy offers a range of levelling and tweaking options. A visit to the Drill Grounds allows you to distribute experience points among students (though levelling is done by unit type rather than on a student-by-student basis) and change the class of units which have earned enough 'credits' in battle – scouts can become snipers, or more heavily armoured scout veterans, for example. Hop over to the R&D buildings and you can purchase new weapons, as well as vehicle parts for your fully customisable tank, using blueprints gained by taking out named targets during missions.






Co-op attacks double potential damage, but require co-ordination. Selecting units simultaneously grants minor bonuses



MAFIA II

FORMAT: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED), PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES DEVELOPER: 2K CZECH
PREVIOUSLY IN: E190, E202, E217, E214







Fistfights are bland bust-ups, a case of waiting, waiting and bashing the jab button. Attacking bystanders usually results in a wanted rating that can be shaken by running around a corner

Not so much an offer you can't refuse as an open world you can't abuse, *Mafia II*'s city, Empire Bay, is the backdrop for 2K Czech's tale, not a living, breathing ecology to accommodate your whims and wants.

It would be wrong to denigrate *Mafia II* for the linearity of its structure; it's design rather than a copout, a straightforward series of missions tied by the thread of an anti-hero's journey through the '40s and '50s, in the shadow of WWII and economic uncertainty (the New York inspiration extends to direct lifts of the Empire State and Chrysler buildings). In its opening act, some three hours of driving to and from shootouts, *Mafia II* conjures an evocative sense of place that supports and layers a story that, while familiar, is involving and driven.



It's nothing you haven't seen before in any number of sandbox titles or derivative movies featuring masculine posturing, bullying and slicked hair

Vito Scaletta is the returning soldier who drifts into a life of crime when times are hard. After a prologue set in Italy during WWII – a military skirmish that openly pays homage to 2K Czech's past life as Illusion Softworks, of *Hidden & Dangerous* fame – it's back to the big city and the desperate struggle. Your first moments in Empire Bay are your most memorable: the radio whispers wintry songs as you take your first steps towards the family abode, suitcase in hand, and you're met by welcoming faces and expositional soundbites. Manufactured as it may be, it's atmospheric and well-realised. There's a fine attention to detail: from the weathered, weary faces to the soft lighting and palette, 2K Czech's proprietary Illusion engine is capable of both scale and minutiae. It's a shame such nuanced visual direction doesn't last longer, as all too soon it's down to gun-toting business. Though Scaletta's greed for easy money is regularly expounded, it's not a motivation that's fleshed out enough to invite pathos and propel you through the game's ten hours. There are other gaping holes, too, such as Scaletta's religious household and upbringing, contrasted with his passivity around acts of moral depravity.

The runtime is divided between action set-pieces and travelling to and from mission



The mediocrity of manual labour is used in part to justify Scaletta's slide into crime. 2K Czech shoots itself in the foot, however, by making the cig-selling minigame equally tiresome







Set-pieces like shooting up a rival's bar are staged to give a sense of involvement. The sound of plywood punctured by lead is one you'll hear time and time again, and never tire of


The rattle of a Thompson is captured believably, and the character animation as flesh is torn by bullets is an achievement. Running and gunning through the dark, desolate streets after a heist is a highlight



Though you're relegated only to driving duties, the street escapes and rundowns are thrilling and vicious. The AI is sharp enough to give you a challenge as you wheelspin around a faux-Manhattan

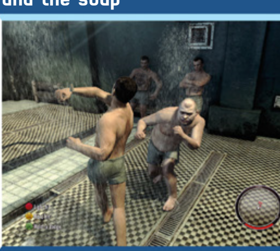
A showdown in a factory yard is a highlight, with you and your crew gradually taking control of each section with superior marksmanship and cocksure one-liners. Bada-bing, etc

markers, with the occasional street chase and bar-room detour. It's nothing you haven't seen before in any number of sandbox titles or derivative movies featuring masculine posturing, bullying and slicked hair. Fortunately, the funnelling of the developer's resources into the core gameplay, rather than anything more ambitious or sprawling, results in a level of polish to proceedings that dazzles like a fake Rolex. Underneath, it's a thirdperson shooter in the mould of *Kane & Lynch* – sticking to cover and popping out to rattle off a burst from your Tommy-gun is your rinse-and-repeat mandate. Though the duck-and-cover shootouts are, at times, fantastic (thanks to perfect hit detection and animations), it's a shame the hand-to-hand combat doesn't quite measure up. Taking its cues from the likes of Sega's *Yakuza*, fisticuffs are enclosed encounters, a case of holding block and countering with a jab until your foe is out cold. Vehicles bounce and bump around the bustling city convincingly, with the returning speed-limiter a valuable asset in preventing a fine or arrest (the press of a button caps your speed). The police, rather than a polarity of stringent and forgiving, are incompetent. Running red lights and driving towards oncoming traffic are apparently forgivable offences, while gunning down bystanders can be shaken off within seconds by a leap of a fence or a change of clothes.

It's in *Mafia II*'s second act that it takes a real dive, and familiarity plunges into cliché. When the writers run out of literary coal, there's little to keep you on the rails, and nowhere to take a time-out. It descends into a festival of stereotypes and expletives, laying waste to the hints of narrative depth proffered earlier and offending beyond justification as it ticks the down-and-dirty genre boxes. An assault on a Chinese restaurant, fronting an opium den, is so ridiculously over-the-top you expect *Stranglehold*'s Tequila to dive past in slow motion at any moment. It's a shame because for every minus there's a plus on *Mafia II*'s books: a fleeting taste of crime's consequences, a series of thrilling car chases and an inviting, nurturing learning curve.

There is, perhaps, a metagame moral in *Mafia II*'s open-world teasing. It reminds us that the best sandbox stories are still within the reach of good writers rather than frivolous player-agency. Though 2K Czech's operation doesn't run entirely smoothly, there's a definite spark of potential and the roots of an abandoned attempt to engineer something more than throwaway entertainment. Like the characters it portrays, *Mafia II* expects loyalty to its blinkered cause but unfortunately, in a more fatal parallel, it also falls prey to the offer of easy money and some cheap thrills. **[6]**

Dropping your guard, and the soap



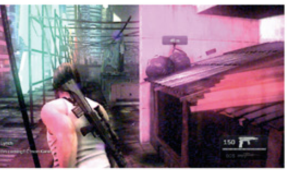
***Mafia II* attempts to bring some sense of consequence to Vito Scaletta's criminal indulgences. Imprisoned mid-game for his crimes, players are introduced to the world on the inside. A firstperson walk of shame into the prison yard is greeted by the sadistic, aggressive whoops and hollers of segregated prisoners leering at their prey. As hackneyed as that sounds, it's a commendable stab at varying the pace. The job is botched when 2K ushers you from this potential parable on justice into a cheap set of fistfights with the usual suspects: shower-room perverts and grandstanding prison egos.**



KANE & LYNCH 2: DOG DAYS

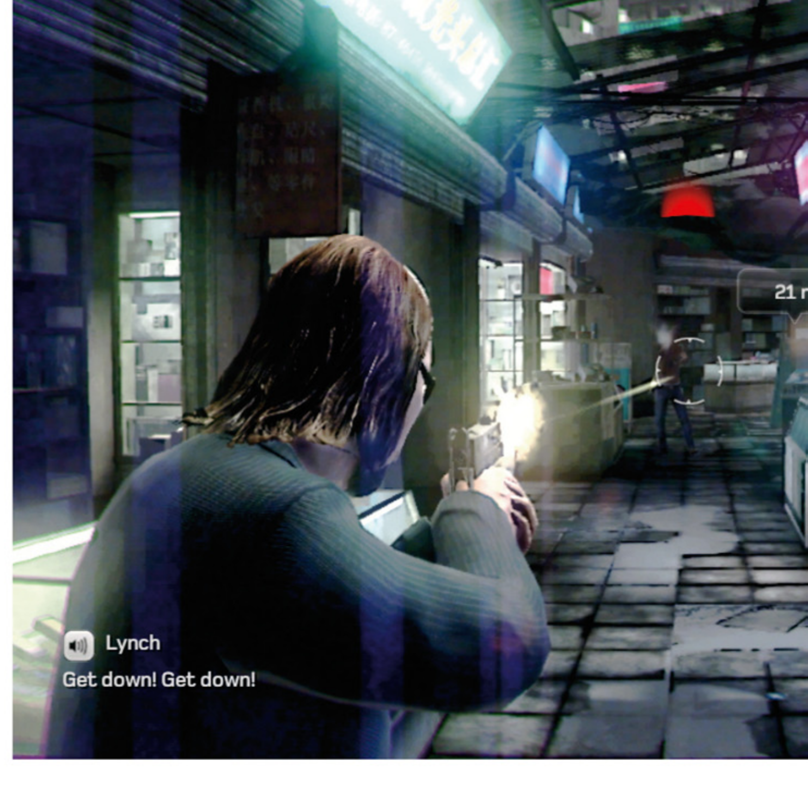
FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EIDOS **DEVELOPER:** IO INTERACTIVE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E211, E214, E216







Industrial and urban filth doesn't always come across well in screenshots, but much of IO's environmental design is ugly in the most beautiful way: it has a good line in filthy pools of water and sodium lights seen through drizzle



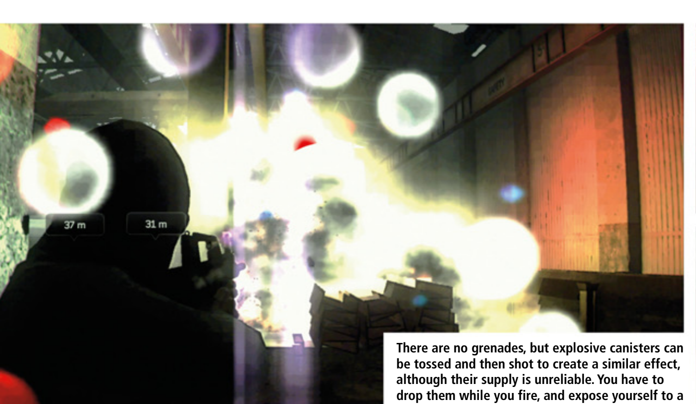
By the end of *Dog Days* our two anti-heroes, Kane and Lynch, have been battered and brutalised – not to mention subjected to some especially grizzly body modification by way of a mobster and his craft knife. But if anything, it's the city that comes out worst from its clash with the criminal duo. IO Interactive's thirdperson shooter sequel recreates a Shanghai at its darkest moments, a super-urban nightmare of tightly packed skyscrapers and decaying alleys, the entire hyper-reality lit either by flickering neon or the sallow flat sunlight filtered by a thick pillow of smog. This is neither a love letter nor balanced travel journalism, but it is a dizzying, dense and powerful fiction, and it makes *Dog Days*' opening act a furious, alarming experience as the city crowds in with its cluttered skyline and bustling streets, its linear levels managing to be both claustrophobic and suggestive of a bewilderingly large place.

For reasons that are left largely unexplained through the terse cutscenes, gun-for-hire Kane joins his old partner (and now playable character) Lynch in Shanghai for one final job. The job goes bad – as they always do – and the two are left to blast their way to freedom through all of about six hours of familiar cover-shooter encounters with crooks and cops. It's a disappointing transition. Those opening sequences see the criminal pair dash after a snitch and his girl as they scarper across rooftops and through apartments. Although its format of checkpoints and patiently waiting quarries won't surprise anyone who's played *Assassin's Creed*, it is a more than usually lurid and disorienting chase thanks to the thirdperson camera that replicates the motion and quality of lo-fi handheld video. But as the game continues, the ambitions slowly evaporate. That chase sequence reveals itself as the exception rather than the rule, and the game devolves into a succession of similar battles in different-shaped rooms.

For a shooter, this would often be a sound enough premise, but *Kane & Lynch* is at risk of fumbling its basic trade. Taking cover is an awkward and prescriptive thing, pulling you into surfaces but leaving parts of you exposed. Crane out of cover to take a shot over a car and you'll often find that Lynch is unloading directly into the bonnet. Sometimes, Kane clips through Lynch as they both hunker behind the same crate, the back of Kane's head looming into the camera and obscuring your view. It's a system without finesse, and its disappointment is compounded by the weaponry itself. With only a few exceptions, the guns feel weightless, and their range is pitiful, spluttering shots into the ether as though the reticule is no more than a polite suggestion as to where the bullets should go.



> Dog Days' opening act is a furious, alarming experience as the city crowds in with its cluttered skyline and bustling streets



There are no grenades, but explosive canisters can be tossed and then shot to create a similar effect, although their supply is unreliable. You have to drop them while you fire, and expose yourself to a volley of bullets when you do eventually lob them

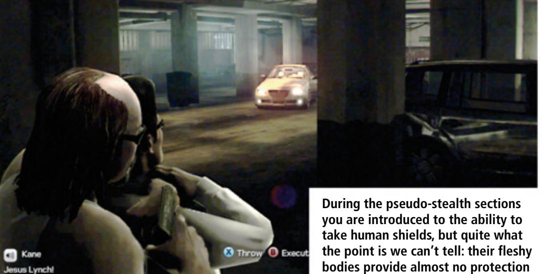




For the first couple of hours you forgive this, buoyed along by the grim promise of *Dog Days*' cruddy environments, by the suggestions of larger, dramatic interaction teased through the cutscenes. But this deal eventually sours – there just aren't enough options in combat to create variety even across this very short game. With the weapon range so locked down and alternative means of attack through melee or grenades unavailable, the same tactics are recycled again and again. Battles are too often a case of holing up to whittle down







During the pseudo-stealth sections you are introduced to the ability to take human shields, but quite what the point is we can't tell: their fleshy bodies provide almost no protection against the hail of bullets from their colleagues, who instantly fire at you





AI opponents have been designed for entertainment rather than realism, and will frequently be found running suicidally into your midst. They also ensure that when they take cover, large, fragile parts of their anatomy often remain exposed

the suicidal enemies who pelt straight at you, before cautiously moving forward via a series of small walls.

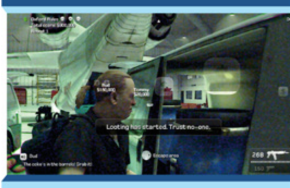
Kane and Lynch's early firefights, which spill out into the busy streets, manage to couch these mechanics in dramatic and evolving situations – cop cars skid to a halt to block off your exit, and pedestrians run screaming from the gunfire. But the game's second half sees the criminal duo bundle through far more familiar scenes of industrial desolation – warehouses, train yards and docks – each drawn with dreary realism, but effectively no more than rooms of crates in which groups of armed men wait to be shot.

When variety arrives, IO oversteps its comfort zone. Some sections imply stealth, but devolve almost instantly into the usual gun battles. An on-rails helicopter ride reduces your input to holding the right trigger at five-second intervals in a methodical exchange of fire with another aircraft. But even as this sequence disappoints in its interaction, the way it's rendered manages to wow, the plate-glass windows of a skyscraper shattering as your bullets tear up office furniture and security guards. It also sets up the ensuing levels with some panache – you later find yourself battling through the very same high-rise suites you are currently disassembling with machine-gun fire.

At the heart of *Dog Days* is this tension between alluring aesthetic and lacklustre action. IO understands drama, is literate in its recreation of gangster shtick and has created two genuinely intriguing creatures in the damaged and disaster-prone pair of career criminals. But the studio's ambitions fail in realising what to do with them – there's a feeble frame of plot on which to hang a large number of never-escalating gun battles. But though we aren't delivered into the depths of these characters, it's to IO's credit that it feels like a waste. Imagine saying that about Marcus Fenix.

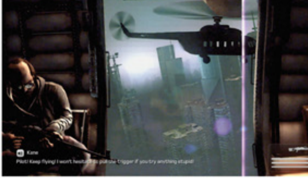
As with so many games, the blights and blemishes are partly concealed by playing it through in co-op, and there are extensive and intriguing multiplayer modes in the package, too (see 'Co-ops and robbers'). But as a singleplayer experience, *Dog Days* feels underdeveloped. Its most striking ideas don't fulfil their promise, and its successes are etched by pervasive minor flaws. The towering, terrifying city, and the lens through which it is shot, drag you onwards through the game's lesser parts, but you sense that the real crime in this whole bloody escapade is that it doesn't live up to its dark flashes of imagination. **[6]**

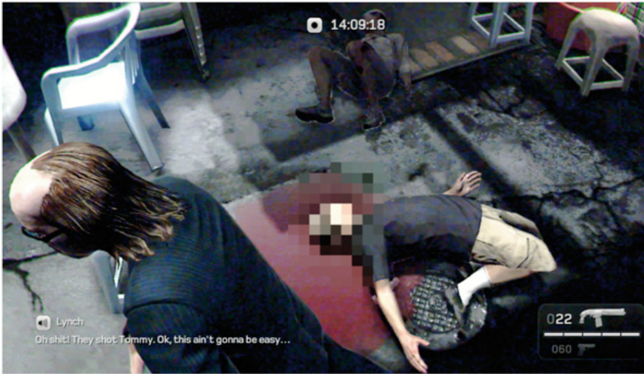
Co-ops and robbers



Dog Days' multiplayer modes are sufficiently complicated that the only fair test of them will be out in the internet wild. However, it's already obvious that they are both inventive and, initially, entertaining. The basic mode, Fragile Alliance, sees players co-operate in a heist, grabbing the cash and fighting their way to the escape vehicle. At any moment, members of the team could turn on the others, taking their cut for themselves. It certainly creates a brilliantly giddy sense of paranoia, but the convoluted scoring encourages tactics that aren't psychologically consistent with the scenario. A full review of these modes will be published on **Edge**'s website in due course.







The YouTube stylings, with their jittering, fragmenting imagery, are effective for bringing a sense of immediacy to the action. The pixellation of gruesome wounds and risqué elements is a neat touch



PUZZLE QUEST 2

FORMAT: 360, DS (VERSION TESTED), IPHONE
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: D3PUBLISHER
DEVELOPER: INFINITE INTERACTIVE

Working the system





It's within your first hour that the learning curve of the main quest inclines steeply (thank you, undead skeleton) and you're immediately forced to get tactical. Gem types correspond to your opponent's stats, with his health represented by skulls. Increasing the effects of combos is where spells and items come in, but it's the weapons that really win the wars. The weapons you choose to assign to your main and off hands – from defensive shields to axes – vastly affect the flow of each duel. Stretched over the randomly falling gem boards, they can lead to a tug of war that's tense, changeable and gripping.

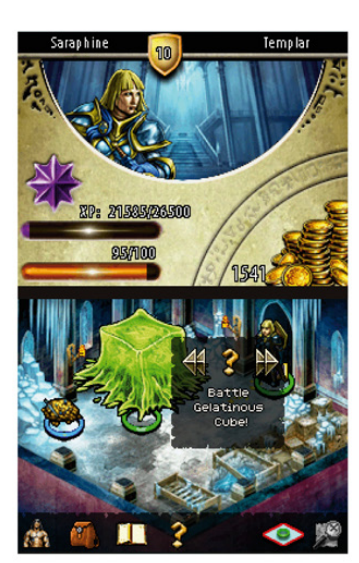
The title of your first quest in this match-three sequel, Rat-O-Phobia, speaks volumes for the level of fantasy we're working with. It's a tribute to the design that such hokum isn't enough to turn you away, but although *Puzzle Quest 2* is technically more advanced and narratively more sprawling, it's also a little laborious.

The combination of character levelling and connecting the blocks hasn't been lobotomised, but it's a shame to find the one area that needed buffing – charm – still lacking. The interval between match-three duelling is spent pointing and clicking on objective markers and pushing through tedious dialogues rather than anything more engaging or, at least, distracting.

Equipping armour, weapons and using items or spells in battles is a fine addition to the formula, though, and certainly the most standout feature of *Puzzle Quest 2*. It adds a layer of strategy that expands the possibilities of each encounter and slows the pace suitably, masking the sense of grind that often came with the original. Should you use the Enrage spell, for example, the board will be riddled with mana-boosting red gems, granting you an upper hand but potentially removing some of the crucial skulls you need to damage your opponent's health. As EXP is gained, the lightweight levelling system is introduced that further increases the variables of a playthrough – especially when it's spread across four distinct character classes. It's just a shame there's so little substance tying it all together; the script and characters are bystanders rather than participants, rendering the character upgrades and customisations a purely clinical affair. Now the series is more fully channelling the mechanics of many successful RPGs, it would be a blessing if any subsequent *Puzzle Quest* could garner the sense of player investment that has typified the best in that genre.

In the era of iPhone *Bejeweled*, the DS version of *Puzzle Quest 2* is now, sadly, at the bottom of the value-for-money pecking order. It's a shame, because Nintendo's hardware is the system best suited to the game, the menu navigation that much easier with the stylus and the density of the match-three board crying out for the DSi XL's bigger, brighter display. There's further disappointment in the overall art style – in visual form as well as RPG content, this is a fossil record of the 16bit era.

It'd be easy to punch holes in *Puzzle Quest 2* for not moving the match-three vehicle farther down the road, but it's not a series that's stalled, just one built on a concept that hasn't really moved on. The gems that this sequel is connecting – the RPG and match-three puzzler – still need one more to complete the chain: character. **[6]**



Who knew matching three would be so handy? Quests range from dousing fires to breaking down doors and then on to standard fare like defeating a gelatinous cube







Levelling is achieved across the usual RPG criteria of strength, agility, stamina and intelligence. Some, like strength, are more worthwhile than others, with a range of benefits enhanced by items such as swords



Having to approach each NPC after a completed quest is a needless barrier standing between you and your well-earned bounty. Side-quests are your key to levelling up more quickly, and offer a range of remixed game types





RUSE

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3, PC **RELEASE:** SEPTEMBER 17
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** EUGEN SYSTEMS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E211, E217



While the campaign features two storylines, one from the Allied point of view, and one from the Axis, there are actually six factions to play as in multiplayer, each with their own variations on unit types spread across seven categories

You play as a general in *Ruse*, observing the ebb and flow of battle from a command tent, miles from the action. You pore over maps punctuated by counters that represent Allied and Axis units inching forward and backward in smooth, abstract movements. But, simultaneously, you also play as an observer on the frontlines, panning the camera around your troops as they sprint for cover, catching blood spatters and tank treads in realtime, as your broad-sweep instructions are carried out in agonising detail. It's a marriage of viewpoints that could only be expressed in a videogame, where an easing of the analogue stick zooms the camera in from the general's sky view of the theatre of war to the front stalls, the game space transformed into a zoomed-in view of the unfurled map.

The long zoom technique also visually captures the unique systematic feel of Eugen Systems' World War II-themed RTS, which is rendered as a turn-based board game, yet plays out in realtime, expecting you to observe, react and, through the use of the card-like Ruses, attempt to deceive and out-intelligence your opponent on the fly. The size of maps facilitates strategy on a grand, ambitious scale, and soon into the generous singleplayer campaign, you'll be pushing against and defending on multiple fronts. Troop movement orders are rendered in large attractive arrows, and, while the action is often tortuously slow as infantry and tanks creep across the landscape, the accuracy of command afforded by the zooming viewpoint is precise.



Each unit has its own visual range, which enables you to set up ambushes effectively, positioning infantry units in wooded areas, where their offensive capacity is tripled



Maps are divided into sections, onto which you can play the titular Ruse cards. These offer temporary intelligence and counter-intelligence advantages, revealing the identity of all enemy units in an area, for example, or hiding your own units from your opponent's gaze. The Ruse mechanic helps add short-term strategy to battles, moving the tactical play away from simply seeing who can build the largest army the quickest to something far more nuanced and fresh. The option to deploy decoy units enables you to manipulate your opponent's strategy, potentially tricking them into focusing on a type of unit that you're strong against, and these mind games bring something new and exciting to competitive play.

The use of micro-objectives in the singleplayer campaign is successful, with extra points doled out for, say, completing a manoeuvre without losing a tank

Eugen's real triumph has been in packaging the game's complexities in an entirely accessible manner. By cross-developing for PC and console, the French developer has found a way to facilitate deep strategy on just a handful of buttons, streamlining the interface at little cost to the tactician. The conservative setting and lack of an engaging storyline may do little to excite RTS veterans but, in its ruleset, *Ruse* expands upon the genre in a way that goes beyond gimmick. As a result, it's deserving of a wider audience than recently released high-profile rivals might allow for. **[8]**

Flog of war



That most awkward of RTS conceits, the fog of war, makes far more sense here. Enemy positions are always visible on the map, but the identity of the specific unit type is only revealed when a friendly unit has line of sight. You know where the pockets of action lie, but the nature and severity of the threat remains hidden. Of course, there's always a chance your opponent has used a 'Radio Silence' Ruse card to hide the position of his units. In this case, you'll only know of their whereabouts at the moment of ambush or, alternatively, when you play a 'Spy Plan' counter-measure card, to light all enemies up in a map sector.



Experience points are earned upon completion of a map across all game modes. Level rankings are separate for the campaign mode and for one-vs-one and two-vs-two championships



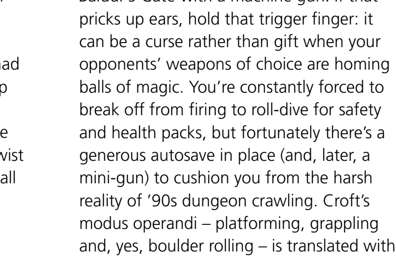




Remote mines are one of the handiest weapons available. They're put to particularly good use in the more cerebral puzzles that require patience, timing and lots of noise

LARA CROFT AND THE GUARDIAN OF LIGHT

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E214



Climaxes to levels are divided between shockingly easy boss battles (the finale excluded) and set-pieces that require twitch reflexes. There's a giant fish, too

Under the tutelage of new publisher Square Enix, Crystal Dynamics takes on the biggest relic of all: the console dungeon crawler. After the flurry of *Legend*, *Anniversary* and *Underworld*, it'd be easy to see it as a step back into the safe money of casual DLC. Even if it is a spinoff rather than a main event, though, this a team that knows how to deliver thrills in even the smallest, simplest packages.

The Guardian Of Light is what *Tomb Raider* would have been 14 years ago, had Core Design opted for an isometric romp through some supernaturally infested catacombs rather than working to define the thirdperson action adventure. The twist is that Crystal Dynamics has rendered it all with high-end tech, while the map and puzzle design adds depth that's often absent from this archaic genre.

In singleplayer, it's best described as *Baldur's Gate* with a machine gun. If that pricks up ears, hold that trigger finger: it can be a curse rather than gift when your opponents' weapons of choice are homing balls of magic. You're constantly forced to break off from firing to roll-dive for safety and health packs, but fortunately there's a generous autosave in place (and, later, a mini-gun) to cushion you from the harsh reality of '90s dungeon crawling. Croft's modus operandi – platforming, grappling and, yes, boulder rolling – is translated with ease into the new fixed perspective, and makes navigation natural and intuitive.

The puzzles – some micro (find artifacts, activate gates) and some macro (entire maps made up of linked mini-dungeons) – too often rely on grinding/blasting your way through a gang of goons, a result of the arcade-style approach but also a concession to a less-committed audience looking for cheap cartoon thrills (the bookended cutscenes are static cartoons rather than anything time-consuming like a cinematic).

Multiplayer rations Lara's two primary solo tools – a spear that can be used to scale heights and a grappling hook for swinging – between the two participants and leads to a stop/start progression that demands, rather than prefers, co-operation. More than a bolt-on, the game design shifts to accommodate two players, presenting slight changes to puzzles to keep veterans of singleplayer on their toes. It means that both play modes are defined experiences on shared ground, not two warring tenants.

As the more intimate title suggests, this may be as much about Croft's brand awareness in the face of unprecedented (and *Uncharted*) competition. It certainly gets the job done in the gap between boxed releases, but you can't resist the feeling that this series about grand adventure should be scaling greater heights. **[6]**

Croft's abilities remain mostly intact from her previous outings. Dive-rolling away from traps and arrows, and falling to her death in a pit, are all par for the course



Princess of sales?



Having acquired Eidos last year, Square Enix made no fuss about releasing the lifetime sales figures for the franchise, lifting the lid on Croft's highs and lows in over a decade of multiplatform releases. It was unsurprising to find the series never bigger than its 1996 debut, with close to eight million units shifted. More interesting was the fine line between 2003's *Angel Of Darkness* and 2006's refresh, *Legend* – both floating near the three million mark. *Underworld* sold fewer still, but hopefully this won't deter Crystal Dynamics from building on its many strengths for the next game in the main series.







TOM CLANCY'S HAWX 2

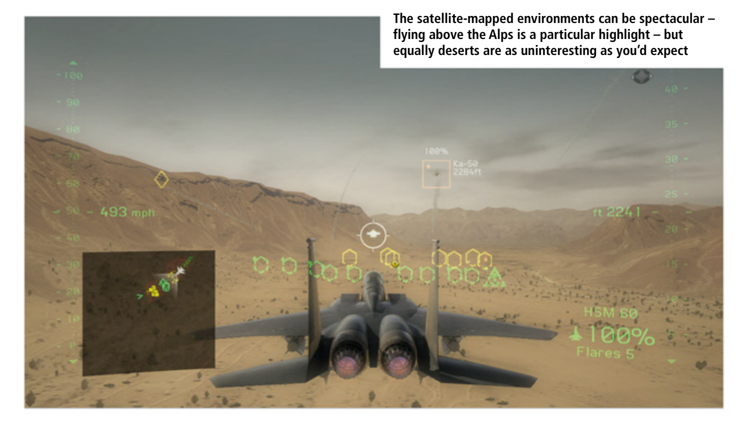
FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3, PC, WII RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 3
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: UBISOFT ROMANIA

Tom Clancy's cabal of warfighters, hostage rescuers and fighter pilots have fought in so many conflicts during their short gaming lives that they've begun to lose track of their enemies. *HAWX 2* doesn't attempt to broach the subject until three hours in, preferring the catch-all term 'insurgents'. Blessed with a near-limitless supply of planes and ground forces to take on the player's revolving door of heroic jet pilots, they feel more like a standing army, emanating from some indistinct location in gaming's ominous 'Middle East'.

Eventually, *HAWX 2*'s plot wheezes into life, trying to explain away your foe's seemingly unlimited access to multimillion-dollar military equipment – but not before the easily bored will have turned the game's incessant repetition of the useful word 'insurgent' into a drinking game. The script reads like it's been redacted by a military body – Clancy himself? – and dances around any recognisable factions without grace.

That very deliberate unrealism sits oddly with a game proud to show off its real-world chops. Many of *HAWX 2*'s stages have been mapped by satellite, presenting a genuine surface to whizz your fighter across at some ridiculous speed. Later in the game, real locations are tossed around, South Africa's Table Mountain getting a specific nod. Similarly detailed are the hyper-expensive machines you'll be piloting, pornography for those raised on Airfix models, their flapping air brakes and landing gear all rendered in a suitably functional gunmetal grey, engines a powerful orange.

But launching these jets from runways across the planet lacks any kind of bite. The speedometer informs you you're hurtling through sky at a thousand miles an hour, but there's no sensation of speed against the Google Earth-esque GeoEye backdrops. Only when you get in close to the ground does *HAWX 2* deliver on its promise of piloting the world's fastest toys – the meat of the game is spent spinning and banking, dodging missiles and lining up long-range lock-ons. After giving you the open air and the means to slice it open, *HAWX* is remarkably keen to take over, backseat pilots needling you to play the correct way. Landing is a simple matter of slowing down in a straight line; the option for an assisted landing throwing up literal hoops for you to fly through, going through long, lazy approach patterns.



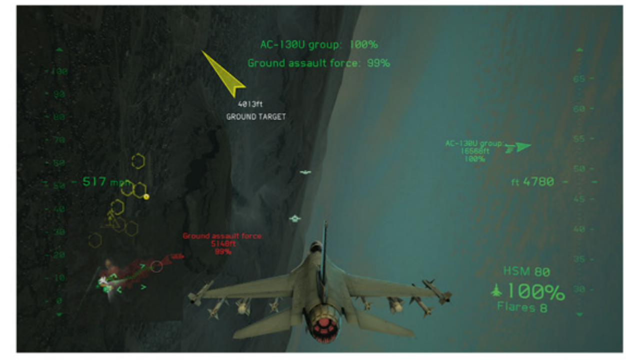
The satellite-mapped environments can be spectacular – flying above the Alps is a particular highlight – but equally deserts are as uninteresting as you'd expect

These overcomplicated ways to spice up cockpit life are joined by drone and gunner missions – lengthy point-and-click exercises that play like *Modern Warfare*'s AC-130 scenes at half speed. One of these death-from-above jobs is a neat distraction. Five times, and with an utter lack of self-awareness, and it becomes tiresome.

A game about the most ridiculous form of human-on-human combat, *HAWX 2* should be anything but pedestrian. But in miring the action in a crayon-written plot and applying air brakes to anything going too fast, the screaming thrills it does provide are the exception, not the norm. **[5]**

Off Mode (below) returns from the first game, zooming the camera out and turning off flight aids to allow for flips and loops you can't perform from the follow-cam view. It can make lining up a target more difficult, though





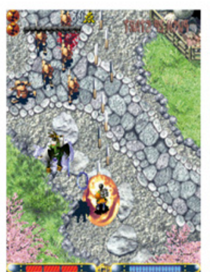
Plane sailing

Arcade and survival modes jettison any sense of realism, and feel more like what the game was made for: accumulate enough experience by downing foes, and you'll be able to use newly acquired planes and abilities as you customise your pilot. There's a set of paths for players to follow: pump enough points into the ground attack chain and you'll eventually get the beefy Su-34 Fullback, for example. A leisurely free flight mode lets you unwind from the stresses of dogfights, regions around the world mapped and presented for a flyby.



GUWANGE

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: TBA
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: CAVE





Ancient bridges act as funnel points, focusing the swarms of attackers and their non-stop projectile attacks, forcing you to clear paths ahead before being able to continue up the screen, *Mercs*-style

If *DonPachi* saw Cave, the architect of the modern vertical shoot 'em up, lay down the flat blueprint for the bullet hell shooter, then *Guwange*, a 1999 arcade shooter re-released on 360, sees the developer literally add depth. The near-impenetrable shower of enemy fire remains, presenting a constantly shifting, dynamic maze that must be negotiated with pixel-perfect precision. But by casting the player as a human, running along the turf of Muromachi-era feudal Japan, the environment presents a secondary physical puzzle through which you must pick routes across bridges, around houses and over craggy hills.

Not only that, but *Guwange* boasts one of the more complex firing systems in the genre, one that requires you stay constantly aware of the height and depth of enemies in relation to you within the physical space. By holding down the fire button, each of the three selectable characters deploys their spirit guide, a force which can be directed around the screen to deploy bomb attacks (useful for attacking enemies on the other side of barriers), collect power-ups and slow down enemy fire. While the move slows down your character too, the chance to interrupt and distort the hail of enemy bullets provides much-needed breathing space to a style of game that, for many, is overwhelmingly aggressive.

As a result, *Guwange* appears the most accessible of Cave's late-'90s output, even if the latter stages of the game, particularly in the two extra modes featured in this update, will require a combination of dedicated practice and natural skill to overcome. That said, there are no concessions to the newcomer. The game is designed exclusively for score attack or single credit runs, its stern Japanese arcade mentality unmoved by the jump to console and a potentially wider audience with no extra credits or easier modes. The heavily bordered play area seems anachronistic and few have the option of using the vertical screen option. Despite all this, the game remains enthralling and the fully featured leaderboards will obsess and delight those skilled or patient enough to excel at it. **[8]**




This 360 port is visually dated, a relatively tiny, bordered TATE screen within a screen displaying the action. Three additional layout options, which cut out and zoom in on various HUD elements, do little to help



SCOTT PILGRIM VS THE WORLD

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Fast, heavies, blocks and specials: *Scott Pilgrim Vs The World* has all of the features you should expect to find in a stripped-back arcade-styled fighter, but there's something else going on beneath the chunky pixellated coating and *Streets Of Rage* cribbing, too. Ubisoft's latest exists at the spinning centre of a retro-flavoured meme-savvy cross-media singularity – one in which the constituent elements are so densely tangled together that you'd be forgiven for half expecting the whole unstable mass to suddenly erupt, sending LOLcats, Japanese emoticons and imported Pocky flying.

Although this is a videogame based on a movie that's based on a series of books that were themselves heavily influenced by boss-rush videogames, thankfully you won't have to dig too deeply through the intertextual thatchwork to find the genuine action. Beneath the in-jokes and brand servicing, in fact, it's refreshing to discover that *Scott Pilgrim* is actually a pleasantly dour brawler at heart: a heavy-footed and often faintly punishing slog through themed levels, each culminating in a fight against one of your girlfriend's evil ex-boyfriends.

The pummelling, while unrelenting, is sound enough (and often even stylish), the detailing is excellent, and the game, if slightly drab in singleplayer, becomes pretty slick work with three friends. Meanwhile, Ubisoft's biggest concession to modern gaming – character levelling – fits in fairly well, too, unlocking moves that pad out the fairly stingy opening set.

Too calculated to be a truly sympathetic adaptation, what *Scott Pilgrim* is missing in inspiration it makes up for – inappropriately – with sheer professionalism. It may be quietly lacking when it comes to the ad-libbed charm of the source material, but this is still a detailed and intelligent fraud: a slice of cool, corporate entertainment for an audience that probably sees no contradiction within that notion. **[6]**

Retro stylings permeate all the way down to an unforgiving save system. As a solo experience, the generous levels can become a bit of a grind



The pixel art is by Paul Robertson and chiptunes are by Anamanaguchi. There's also a wealth of videogame references that aren't bad either







ACE COMBAT: JOINT ASSAULT

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** SEPTEMBER 24
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

Joint Assault is the first *Ace Combat* game to take place in familiar skies. The alternate Earth setting has gone, with real-world locales including Tokyo, San Francisco and the Midway atoll providing the backgrounds for the game's near-future air war.

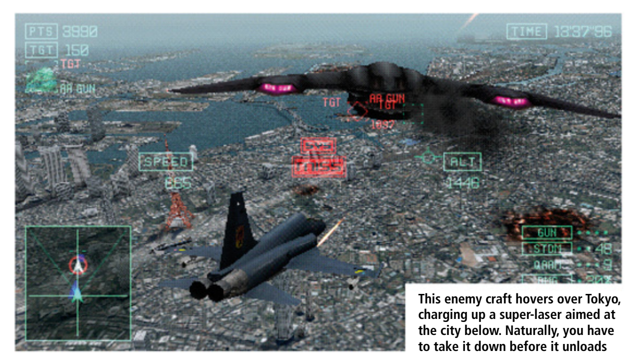
The plot sees technologically advanced terrorists invading key cities, and as a rookie pilot hired by private military company Martinez Security, your mission is to stop them using a series of extremely fast fighter jets.

To do this, you roll and pitch with the analogue nub and manage your speed with the shoulder buttons. Locking on to enemies is as simple as hovering your sights over them, and a stab of the circle button will release a missile. It's a simple, responsive control scheme, and true to the series' roots the gameplay is fast and immediate.

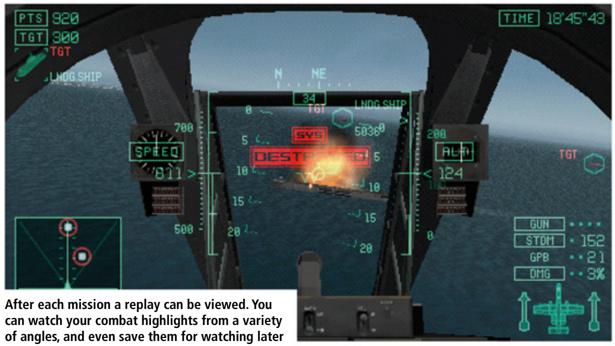
Enemies come in a variety of forms, which keeps missions textured and engaging. The majority are rival jet pilots, but the Valahia also command vast floating fortresses. These provide some of *Joint Assault's* most exciting battles; to down the gargantuan craft, you must first destroy their defences then take out their engines while being pursued by enemy fighters. The rousing score, with its pounding tribal drums, is fine accompaniment.

A full co-op mode lets you complete missions together as you'd expect or, more interestingly, separately, with each player's actions affecting the outcome of the other's mission – for example, one player can reduce the amount of reinforcements their partner will have to face, making their objectives easier.

Murky, muted visuals and a lack of ground detail let the game's presentation down, but the satisfying combat and customisation – especially when you unlock the Tune menu, which lets you add custom parts to your aircraft – do their best to hold your attention despite the frequently repeating missions. **[6]**



This enemy craft hovers over Tokyo, charging up a super-laser aimed at the city below. Naturally, you have to take it down before it unloads



After each mission a replay can be viewed. You can watch your combat highlights from a variety of angles, and even save them for watching later



SHANK

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA **DEVELOPER:** KLEI ENTERTAINMENT



Our hero might be convincing in action, but less so when required to emote (the Arnie parallels continue), and dialogue is delivered clumsily

Shank, despite the pointed pseudonym, is pure blunt instrument. Fiery of temper and thick of neck, he barrels through the game's brisk but brutal run time like Schwarzenegger in his prime, minus the one-liners. The game from which he takes his name is equally cinematically inspired, owing as much to Tarantino's more kinetic efforts as it does to genre trailblazers like *Double Dragon*. Notably, the violence is at once cartoonish, adult and satisfying.

Combat encourages button mashing, but it's only truly effective when tempered by cautious crowd control. Genre standards such as air juggles and grenades thin the pack, and a pounce move combined with judicious use of firearms allows our hero to escape the melee by leaping on to a distant enemy. It's a neat, deceptively complex system that makes a virtue of the game's otherwise rather limited 2D play area.

The game is at its best when at its most manic – most of the time, at least. Even proficient players will stifle a groan when bigger enemies (thrown in to spike an otherwise flatlining difficulty curve) enter the fray. The approaching sound of feet is more taunt than warning when caught in the middle of a combo. Similarly irritating is the poor enemy placement that allows them to shoot you off ledges with little or no warning.

The co-op mode is also less successful than it might have been. It's just as intense an experience, but at times too intense. The resulting melee can become confusing (heroes and villains look too much alike in the heat of the moment) and successful attempts to fend off waves of baddies can lead to the action spilling off the edge of the screen.

Like the movies that doubtless inspired it, *Shank* ultimately has more style than substance. It looks fantastic but it's hardly a lengthy game, and it does little to trouble your brain. As throwaway entertainment goes, though, it's solid popcorn stuff. **[6]**



Flourishes such as slow-mo attacks, silhouetted scenes and often gory cinematics add to the cinematic feel


TOMB
RAIDER II
LARA CROFT

TIME EXTEND



TOMB RAIDER II

FORMAT: **MAC, PC, PLAYSTATION**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **CORE DESIGN**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **1997**

Long before Lara Croft was given a full personality, she already had something far more important – a great travel agent

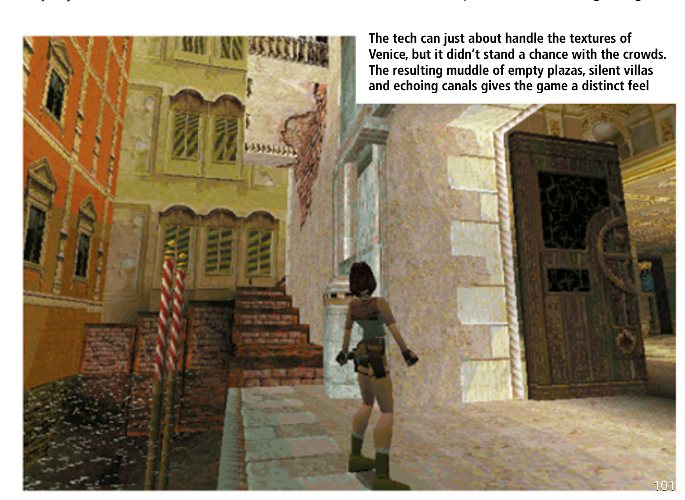
The people who hate advertising the most are generally those who fear that it actually works. From that perspective, it's easy to see *Tomb Raider* as some manner of grimly evolved exploitation flick: a title that owes its success to anatomy rather than level design; a series to prove that, just so long as you can work an improbably curvy lady into the box art, the drooling masses will spend money on almost anything.

There are some problems with that hypothesis – not least the fact that there are plenty of examples of sultry sirens aimed squarely at the top ten charts who subsequently went on to land in the bargain bins instead. In fact, *Tomb Raider*'s very own publisher Eidos did a pretty good job of reinforcing the point that sex wasn't a force that could shift videogames in vast quantities by the mid-'90s, with an enthusiastic parade of pneumatic travesties. They all ended up heavily discounted and with little but studio closures and a shared history of lower back pain to show for their efforts.

Besides, there's an even knottier problem awaiting anyone who's looking to pin the success of *Tomb Raider* solely on its leading lady. Lara Croft may have been an instant videogame superstar, but she didn't really take shape as a genuine character until long after the series' heyday. It took a narrative-centred reboot and the arrival of Crystal Dynamics to finally bring her into focus, unifying the backstory, atoning for a decade of horrible dialogue, and taming the wayward plots.

But if the series' early appeal can't be entirely traced back to Croft, what was it that made the games so staggeringly popular? After all, Core Design was no Nintendo, and even in its true blockbuster period there was something undeniably crude about *Tomb Raider*. Take into account the stuttering cutscenes, the fumbling lunges for an air of sophisticated sexiness or the fact that, beneath the fur, scales or costume-shop outfits, the game's enemies tended to be drab chunks of health bar that either stayed put (which was bad enough) or moved around in circles (which was even worse) while you stoically slogged through the business of shooting them to death. It can be difficult to see what kept fans coming back for in each new instalment.

Tomb Raider II should be one of the worst of the bunch. Lara Croft's Chinese adventure flings mindless foes, wonky cinematics and faux-sultry non-sequiturs at you with a distinctly foolish enthusiasm. And yet, somehow, the end result stands out as the best example of the one perfect thing that Core Design always got right: the single sharp idea that makes up for all those rough edges.



The tech can just about handle the textures of Venice, but it didn't stand a chance with the crowds. The resulting muddle of empty plazas, silent villas and echoing canals gives the game a distinct feel



MIND YOUR MANORS

Until Crystal Dynamics had the sad idea of blowing the place to pieces, *Tomb Raider II* was the only one of Croft's adventures to try to properly fit her rambling house into the narrative. While bored gymnasts can still fritter away countless hours vaulting over banisters and getting lost in the gardens during campaign downtime, once the game has reached its climax it returns to the Home Counties just before the credits roll, as hired goons turn up for one last gun battle. It may be a final chance to revel in *Tomb Raider II*'s unsatisfying gunplay, but going out in such a blaze of glory also provides an excellent opportunity to enjoy the fruits of poor pathfinding AI, as heavily armed killers get enthusiastically stuck on doorframes and trapped inside the bathroom shower cubicle.



Lara Croft's second outing understands that *Tomb Raider*'s a power fantasy – even if it's not exactly the kind of power fantasy that players might have been expecting. It's a pleasure to fill the shoes of someone gymnastic enough to scale all those epic environments, certainly, but a crucial aspect of the series' appeal is that Croft's rich enough to get there in the first place. This dream of easy wealth underpins Eidos' money-spinner, and helps to explain why one of the greatest pleasures of any *Tomb Raider* has always been Croft Manor, that shifting sprawl of semi-familiar real estate that feels both aimless and an essential inclusion. The manor's a place to practise moves, of course – long before Croft had a personality, she had that breezy, elegant sideways jump for players to latch on to – but it's also to prepare you for the game's true focus: underneath the tiger-shooting and the platform-hopping, *Tomb Raider*'s a lifestyle title in the truest sense of the term, and each matinee adventure is an open invitation to indulge in a prolonged burst of virtual tourism.

And if it's Croft who takes us to some of the best places in western gaming, then none of her exploits have been quite as generous – or quite as inventive – as *Tomb Raider II*. Forget the plot, this time hinging on a mystical dagger with the power to turn its owner into a dragon: what marks the second game in the series out is the quality of the itinerary. Core Design's first *Tomb Raider* gave the team a reputation for getting the temples and ruins right, but the sequel's unusual eastern influence made a welcome change for anyone suffering from the early onset of Sphinx fatigue. The game's bright red pagodas, rickety walkways, vigilant monks, chilly mountaintop monasteries and devious death traps walk the perfect line between caricature and holiday snaps, much as the previous game's underground burial chambers and yawning expanses of hieroglyphics had effortlessly proved that anywhere mainstream cinema could go, games could follow – and follow with style. In the final stages of *Tomb Raider II*, in fact, Croft's travels take her far beyond the confines of virtual film sets, as the sloping tiled roofs, flaming spike walls and shimmering gilt of Chinese ossuaries give way to the kind of environments Mario would probably recognise. The mystical Floating Islands of the endgame provide a missing link between *Mario Galaxy*'s Gusty Garden and the intricate climbing-frame jungles of *Uncharted*, as chunks of bright green grass hover in mid air, transforming every jump into a matter of life and death, and bending gravity into a succession of strange new shapes in the process.



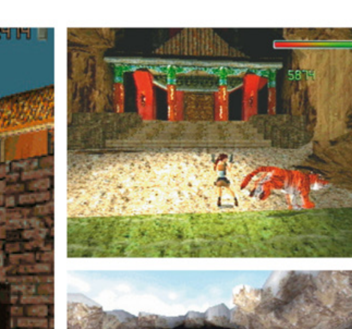
Clearly avoiding most of the contemporary reviews, Core Design seemed to be sufficiently enamoured with *Tomb Raider*'s limp gunplay to significantly step up the numbers of enemies you'd face in the sequel

But perhaps the game's most inspired move lay not within the realms of such fantastical geometry, but with the moments when the developers turned back towards the present day for inspiration. *Tomb Raider II*'s designers were smart enough to realise that the core of the series' environmental appeal was a sense of mystery rather than mere antiquity, and in turn they offered up a range of modern locations that still managed to provide the vital sense of dereliction – and the inhuman scale – that the game required to draw together its sense of lonely exploration.

And, paradoxically, it's in the game's more contemporary spaces that you can really see the design team earning its money. Whether it's by marooning you on a creaking, echoing oil rig, sending you scrambling through the dark labyrinths and crumbling rooftop gantries of a dusty Venetian opera house or – best of all – dropping you deep into the ocean to poke about the rusting hulk of a wrecked ship, each new level of *Tomb Raider II* takes players somewhere no other games would think to go. Certainly, the puzzles you then find within these rambling dungeons are exclusively of the lock and key, switch and sliding door variety, but the detailing – the tables and chairs bolted to the ceiling in a capsized ocean liner ballroom, the scalable platforms built from the pistons and pulleys lurking deep in a leaking engine room – still ensures that the whole thing plays brilliantly in your memory long after your frustrations at careless difficulty spikes, awful gunplay and multi-part fuse hunts have had time to fade.

> **The underground burial chambers and yawning expanses of hieroglyphics proved that anywhere mainstream cinema could go, games could follow**

If it's that masterful range of diverse environments that gives *Tomb Raider* the elusive sense of genuine adventure missing from so many action games, Core Design's lovably rigid grid system brought order to the ensuing chaos, and turned sprawling underground caves into precision gymnasiums, clarifying



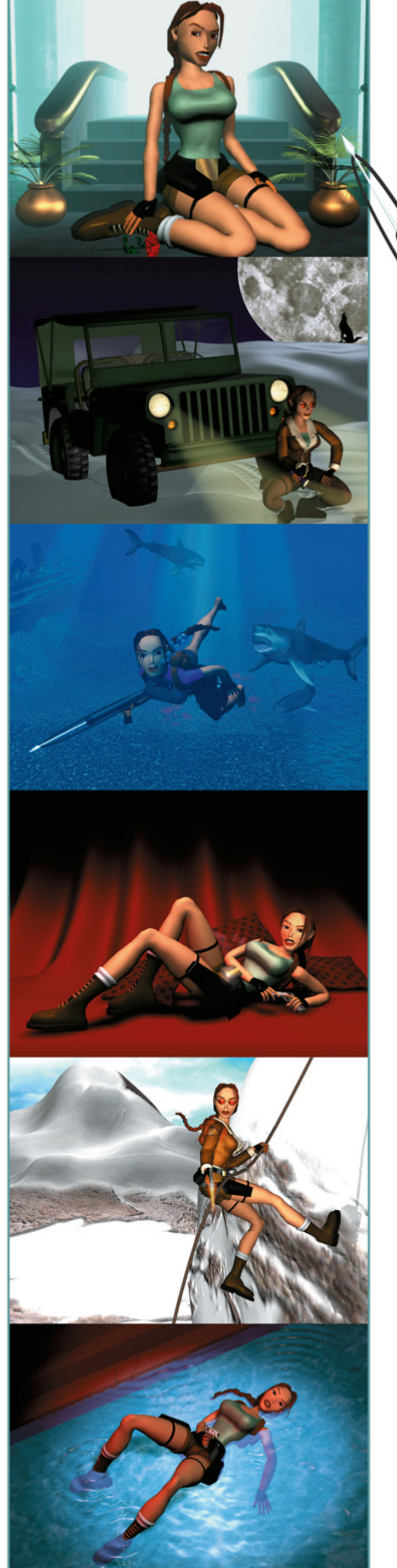


Alongside combat, vehicle sections turned up to spoil the fun somewhat in the massive levels. The icy slopes of a Tibetan mountain were never going to rival *1080° Snowboarding*, but they did evoke the bouncy knockabout driving of Domark's *Big Red Racing*, released a year after its merger with Eidos

exactly which distant platforms could be reached in a single jump, and which sudden drops would result in a crunchy tangle of broken bones at the bottom. The shift to contemporary, often industrial, settings made the chunky, rectangular surfaces favoured by the early 3D technology seem more forgivable, if still not entirely convincing, while fractal patterns of rust or repeating blocks of carpet provided much more sympathetic targets for the texturing than the ancient tumbledown masonry and bleeding alien architecture of the first game ever could.

And so even while, in terms of its combat and puzzles at least, *Tomb Raider II* is as precariously constructed as any of Croft's other Core Design adventures, the end result seems strangely harmonious. Just as the treasure hunt plot ties eastern mythology together with an entirely western brand of avarice, the art team managed to create a graceful blend of old and new architecture without losing that crucial sense of the unknown.

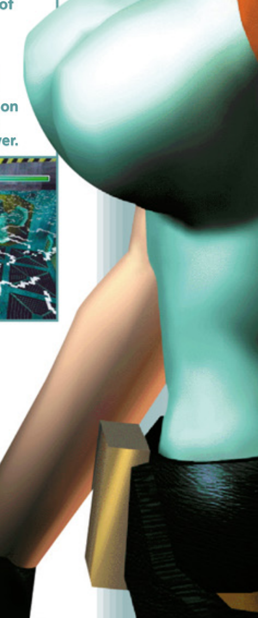
It was a balance that subsequent games would struggle to maintain, with later instalments either caricaturing the contemporary a little too sharply with assaults on futuristic skyscrapers and a misguided trip to Area 51, or losing their way deep within the ancient twisting pathways of a dozen identical mausolea. Such disappointments were to follow, then, but in *Tomb Raider II*, under the shadow of the Great Wall of China or inside a rusting labyrinth deep beneath the ocean, the game achieved an enviable blend of inspirations and influences. For this one particular game the stars aligned, and there was nothing else quite like it.





40 FATHOMS

While every *Tomb Raider* offers a few solid moments of awe as the camera pulls back and an ancient vista washes into view, the second game in the series goes one better, providing a sharp blast of genuine panic, too. Having survived a submarine collision, 40 Fathoms kicks off with Croft floating in the darkness above a vast ocean floor with her air supply running out. Although you're likely to see the restart screen a few times before you properly orient yourself, Core's designers do a fine job of creating a sense of vastness as they skilfully guide you to safety with pieces of carefully positioned wreckage. It's yet another reminder of just how good *Tomb Raider* games can be when they hold back on the action and let the environments take over.



THE MAKING OF...
HARVEST MOON

Yasuhiro Wada's unusual sim-RPG cultivated a fecund niche in the market, despite being developed and released late in the season

FORMAT: **SNES** PUBLISHER: **NATSUME/NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **PACK-IN SOFT** ORIGIN: **JAPAN** RELEASE: **1996 (JAPAN), 1997 (US), 1998 (UK)**

Given that it was released for Nintendo's SNES shortly after both the PlayStation and Nintendo 64 made their Japanese debuts, *Harvest Moon* shouldn't be an instantly recognisable name. Other top-down, sprite-based games of that time (with the rather noticeable exception of *Pokémon Red* and *Green*) struggled to make themselves heard among the clamour of the new. *Harvest Moon* was different, and not just because of its unlikely success. It was and is unique for its playful, earnest synthesis of action-RPG and slow-burning simulation – and, most enduringly, its gentle good nature.

The game presents a comforting alternate reality in which cows smile, friendships are sealed with gifts of dairy produce, and hard work always has its rewards. It paints an idyllic picture of the simplicity and essential goodness of rural life, an idea that has proven especially appealing to the inhabitants of urban Japan. The concept for *Harvest Moon* blossomed from creator and, later, director **Yasuhiro Wada**'s first years working in the videogame industry in Tokyo – a city to out-sprawl all cities – where it first occurred to him to make life in the countryside into a game. "I was raised in the country town of Miyazaki in Kyushu," he tells us, "and I think that it has influenced me greatly."

Wada had always loved games as a boy, particularly the original *Legend Of Zelda*, whose open-world influence can be seen in *Harvest Moon*'s presentation. He had never worked on an original title before *Harvest Moon*, spending two years in advertising after university and his first years in the game industry in production. "After working as a production assistant on PC Engine games, I produced several," he explains. "During that time, I really studied the whole structure of games and the gameplay at their core, working out the logic for myself."

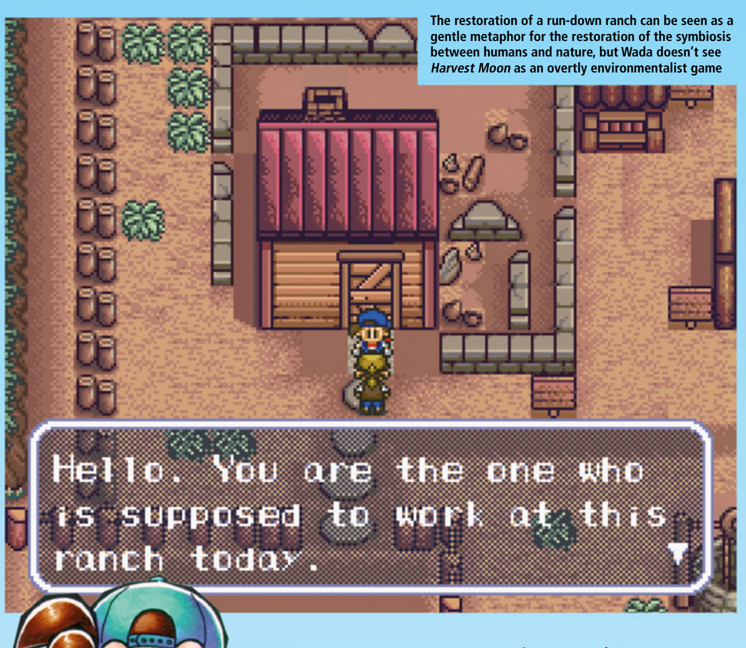
> **"We felt that there was no other game that conveyed this kind of pleasure. The joy of growing things is the same across the world"**

The original draft for *Bokujou*





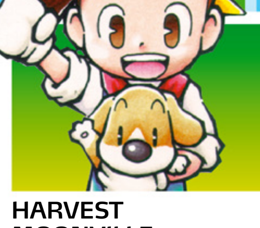




The restoration of a run-down ranch can be seen as a gentle metaphor for the restoration of the symbiosis between humans and nature, but Wada doesn't see *Harvest Moon* as an overtly environmentalist game



Honest hard work is *Harvest Moon*'s central theme and driving concept. Your efforts are reflected in a growing agricultural enterprise, and in the townspeople's increasing respect too



HARVEST MOONVILLE

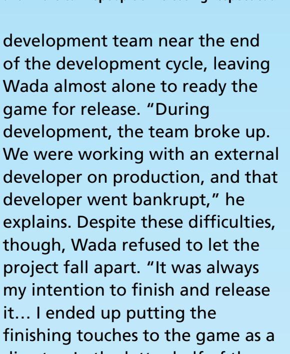
Wada's opinion of Zynga's Facebook phenomenon *FarmVille* (below) is surprisingly rather positive. "I believe that *FarmVille*, for a cheap-and-cheerful simulation, does extremely well," he says. But he's keen to distance it from *Harvest Moon*, asserting – as anyone who has played both knows – that the similarities between the games are largely superficial. "*FarmVille*'s gameplay isn't action based, it's an amalgamation of constructing things and managing them through numbers," he observes. "It might look like *Harvest Moon* in many ways, but *Harvest Moon*'s concept was tactile realtime action. Also, as the series has progressed it has become more popular because of its characterisation and dramatisation. I don't think you can compare the two. What I can say, though, is that if I hadn't made *Harvest Moon* then *FarmVille* would never have been born."



Monogatari – or *Ranch Story* – was complete in 1993, but it spent three years in development. Developer Pack-In Soft hardly had a glittering reputation at the time. "Before I started there it was known as a pretty crappy game developer," laughs Wada. "But during the time I was there there it was properly reorganised, and while we didn't have that many people, everyone was there for the same purpose, and the result was being able to work freely. It was a very good environment."

Making a top-down, 16bit SNES title at a time when 3D gaming had just entered the mainstream market was at the very least extremely brave, but Wada felt that it had its own advantages. Unfazed by the almighty fuss that the 32bit and 64bit consoles were making in the Japanese media, he was confident that *Harvest Moon* could reach a wider audience on established hardware. "I believed that if we could make something new and interesting then it would still be a success," he says. "When a new console is released, the attention of both the media and gamers is inevitably focused upon it, but the SNES was being distributed around the world, and a lot of people had one."

Pack-In Soft endured several shake-ups during *Harvest Moon*'s development, including a restructuring and, most dramatically, the dissolution of *Harvest Moon*'s entire eight-person development team near the end of the development cycle, leaving Wada almost alone to ready the game for release. "During development, the team broke up. We were working with an external developer on production, and that developer went bankrupt," he explains. Despite these difficulties, though, Wada refused to let the project fall apart. "It was always my intention to finish and release it… I ended up putting the finishing touches to the game as a director. In the latter half of the final year it was three people, including myself, who completed it," he recalls. Wada worked most closely with just two other staff, Tomomi Yamatate as a main programmer and Setsuko Miyakoshi as a planner and designer, retaining a large measure of personal creative control – something more recent *Harvest Moon* games, created by much larger teams, no longer enjoy.



Aiming to create a game that conveyed the gentleness and wellbeing of a farming life was unusual in an industry that Wada felt was dominated primarily by violence. "When we started making it no one could imagine what it would look like when it was finished, and as there was no precedent we didn't think it would be very popular," he says. "It had to be a game with no fighting, a game like no other, and a tactile realtime action game. Those were our three starting principles, and remain our enduring ethos."

The moment that Wada and the rest of the development team realised that the concept was working is the same moment that hooks most of *Harvest Moon*'s players: "[It was] the moment when, in the first playable version, we watered a seed and, after a day, a sprout came out. We felt that there was no other game that conveyed this kind of pleasure. The joy of growing things is the same across the world."

Watching the farm evolve from a single sprout to its own agricultural economy is the simple reward at the heart of *Harvest Moon*. Patience is a dying virtue in videogames, but it is the chief trait that *Harvest Moon* both asks of and cultivates in the player, making them wait for plants to sprout, friendships to grow, animals to mature and funds to accumulate. *Harvest Moon*'s gameplay systems bear almost no resemblance to those of any other title released at the time – Wada was adamant that it should be "a game like no other" – but there are some clues to his

> "It had to be a game with no fighting, a game like no other, and a tactile realtime action game. Those were our starting principles"











childhood favourite. "I got a lot of hints about game design from *The Legend of Zelda*," he acknowledges. "For example, In the version of *Zelda* released on the Famicom Disk System, you could set fire to any tree; in the same way, you can cultivate every piece of land in your ranch. I also think that the gameplay, when you're pulling up grass or smashing stones, was influenced by it."

There is perhaps a nostalgia for a less urbanised Japan of the past in *Harvest Moon*. Its green meadows, mountain expanses, farmland and crumbling old houses are not a million miles away from the wistful environmentalism of Hayao Miyazaki films. But Wada doesn't see appreciation of nature necessarily as a longing for the past. "The difference isn't between now and the past; it's between rural and urban," he says. "In other words, it's not that the past was good, it's that the countryside was… The ideology that the past was better is a belief that we should all stop going forward into the future, and I don't like that very much. Saying that the country is 'good' is probably the natural feeling of those who live in cities, in the same way as those who live in the country are drawn to the city. I like them both."

Though Wada never thought his first game would be published overseas, *Harvest Moon* came late to the US in 1997 and to Europe the following year, becoming one of the last ever SNES releases in PAL territories, and one of the rarest. Localisation problems, largely as a result of the sheer amount of text involved in all the dialogue and random incidental moments between the farmer and various townspeople, still plague the series today, often resulting in year-long gaps between Japanese and western versions. Although most of *Harvest Moon*'s Japanese flavour remained intact for its overseas release, it did not go entirely uncensored – all references to alcohol were replaced with the word 'juice' in North America.

Subsequent games in the series have built upon and expanded the social life and agricultural options of their virtual farmers, largely based on player reactions. Ever since the first *Harvest Moon*, the games have shipped with a customer questionnaire in the packaging asking for feedback – a tradition that Marvelous' current development team reputedly still upholds in Japan. In the past 14 years, though, Wada feels that the core principles of the original game haven't changed beyond recognition. "Out of our three starting principles, it's still a game with no fighting, and one with a real tactile nature," he muses. "It's no longer a game unlike any other because we're living in a world with *FarmVille* in it!" It's perhaps proof of the strength of *Harvest Moon*'s concept, though, that more than 75 million people are now playing a farming game. That's quite a legacy for a simple 2D RPG released at the very tail-end of a console's lifespan.





BS BOKUJOU MONOGATARI

The most obscure version of the original *Harvest Moon* isn't, in fact, the extremely limited PAL run (below). A version of *Harvest Moon* was broadcast in episodic form via Nintendo's little-known and absurdly expensive Satellaview, the Japan-only satellite modem Super Famicom accessory which could receive game data broadcasts from Japanese broadcaster St.GIGA. Over the space of four weeks in September 1996, Satellaview subscribers received four *Harvest Moon* episodes and SoundLink voice-acted narration to guide them through and point out the salient gameplay points. It's the curiosity of all curiosities for *Harvest Moon* fans and Nintendo historians, now extant only in difficult-to-emulate ROM form and videos on NicoNicoDouga (the Japanese gamer's YouTube).



Wada's upbringing in Kyushu – the southernmost and most rural island of Japan – had a sizeable influence on the development of *Harvest Moon*



Sub-sonic boom

The Hamburg-based Periscope Studio is using its own engine to define interactive in-game music

Deep beneath Hamburg, something is stirring. In a World War II-era submarine factory in a bunker far below the city's surface, you'll find the aptly named Periscope Studio. The building, once used to the sound of clanks and groans from the manufacture of war machines, now echoes to the sound of state-of-the-art videogame music.

"Our core expertise is audio production and middleware," says **Cornelius Wiegmann**, Periscope's marketing head. "We're a young company, established in 2007 with three founding members – now we are eight." The company's core product is Psai (Periscope Studios Audio Intelligence), due to be launched fully in the fourth quarter of this year.

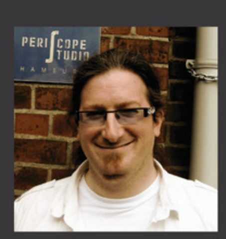
Psai's aim is to dynamically create a game soundtrack on the fly. It's middleware that cuts the complications of a soundtrack composer's job, and intends to produce a musical score befitting modern, free-roaming games. Wiegmann explains: "Psai is an easy solution for a complex problem – we think there's big potential in interactive audio. Take an RPG. Say you're running in a dark and misty forest, and you reach a battlefield: you'll get epic music. Imagine then you went back a few steps, because you'd missed an item. You'd pick up the item, and the epic music is back – it's always scripted."

Thorsten-Tobias Heinze, Psai's London-based product manager, explains this deficiency as a hangover of early game design: "One of the very biggest concerns we had before starting development on this engine was that game music can't react perfectly because there aren't fixed elements. In the '80s and '90s we had fixed, scrolling levels that moved the whole time until a fixed point." In having true freedom, players can peek behind cracks in soundtracks, exposing cue failures or gaps.

Periscope's aim is to produce film-like soundtracks, as Wiegmann says: "A movie score is linear with really dramatic, cineastic scenes that touch you – we want to do the same with games." Heinze goes further, believing that the film and game industries are set to merge soon: "The movie industry now moves more and more into the games industry. The movie industry has a cue point format to get a soundtrack that



Cornelius Wiegmann



Thorsten-Tobias Heinze



www.periscopestudio.de



Periscope's bunker is stuffed with audio production equipment, even a fully fledged studio, so the team can test Psai with their own compositions







really fits to the scene; the need for interactive music engines like Psai will be much greater as games get closer."

Wiegmann's vision of this interactive music is evocative: "Let's say you're fighting the aliens and your health decreases – the music will react to that; a real orchestral sound, getting nervous in response to the game. That's what we want to achieve – a sound that's adaptive and emotional. Let's say you're playing *Bad Company 2* – you playing sniper and me playing assault. I'd have powerful music that changes a lot, full of rhythm and sound. You get silenced, cool music that ties in with what you're doing in the game: say if you're sneaking somewhere, you'd need another kind of music than the assault class."

Heinze continues the explanation: "For example, with sneaking games, the player could be made aware of detection possibilities by the music itself. The Psai engine is really reactive to what's outside. You have close combat music for a battle, but snipers or aerial enemies appear: you can change the music cue so the player can react to it. We wanted to make it like a movie, where everything caters to the scene and gives the whole thing a better, more immersive experience for the viewer."

Periscope came at its engine design from an audio production perspective, working out what tools music creators need before game developers. Heinze explains his science: "We have an AI that uses defined reference tables from the composers. The composers first compose in Cubase or Logic and deliver the cues into the Psai engine. They then define the values for each theme, and as soon as that's done, they can export it and place it directly in the engine."

The Psai engine has been designed specifically to make the composer's job a much simpler one. Heinze again: "Your composer just needs to deliver the soundtrack for the whole game, and the game designer can rearrange it as he sees fit. You plan for scenery – so you have a wood scene, then a sea scene, then you go inside a city. When changes in level design happen, the game designer can change the music if the scenes are moved around. Normally the composer would have to redo everything in the normal game. In this way, you just change the triggers and the composer doesn't need to do anything extra." The intention is to allow composers to retain their vision by having the game's soundtrack locked down early in development; the game designer then uses Psai's triggers to tie it into the game, rather than calling the composer into the office every time something needs altering slightly. Heinze sees it as changing the composer's job: "They're far more independent. Game developers just define what they really need and then get the soundtrack going in the direction they need it to. They don't have to wait for the composer to start after whatever elements of games are finished, which means the composer can be involved from day one."

Periscope's focus is simplification. Heinze is keen to ease the transition of development's more time-consuming processes, allowing teams to focus on making the game enjoyable: "We wanted to make it easy, a no-brainer – like putting a USB stick in. Developers just need a composer and that's it – the rest is done for them."



Psai has been designed from the perspective of a composer's, and the instruments (above) that adorn Periscope's base are an indication of this focus

"Developers define what they really need and then get the soundtrack going in the direction they need"



Over and over

Psai tries to cut down on repetition, blending and melding existing tracks in new ways, even if the player has attempted a similar section multiple times, as Heinze explains: "With the same amount of soundtrack we can do five times the amount of sound, so it's good for keeping the attention of the players. A single MP3 loop gets very boring." Psai also knows when you've already heard a soundtrack segue: "Even switching between the same themes, the transition can be varied. So if you've gone from action to stealth once, the engine knows, and changes the transition. That kills repetition in the audio."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

NAME: Centre for Doctoral Training in Virtual Environments, Imaging and Visualisation

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 40

URL: engdveiv.ucl.ac.uk

CONTACT: +44 (0)113 812 0000





UCL takes graphics quality a step further in these examples of photon mapping (top, centre) and shadow lighting (above) made for SIGGRAPH Asia





LOCATION: London, UK

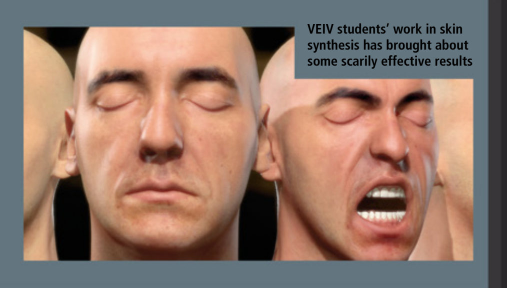
COURSE OFFERED: MRes/EngD Virtual Environments Imaging and Visualisation

KEY STAFF
Prof Anthony Steed (director), Dr Jamie O'Brien (manager)

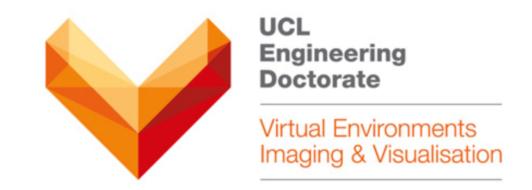
KEY ALUMNI
Dr Siavash Mahdavi (CEO, Complex Matters Ltd), Dr Tony Ruto (CTO, Within Technologies Ltd)

INSIDE VIEW: TIMOTHY SCULLY (MRES/ENGD VEIV)

"The EngD VEIV offers an opportunity to deeply explore a technical problem with an industrial application. One of the biggest challenges in computer graphics is photorealistic rendering of human skin. As a translucent, heterogeneous material, skin features a rich spectrum of subtle light effects, caused by the light undergoing multiple scattering and absorption effects while travelling through the different layers of skin. This project is focused on the development of a digital skin model that should be capable of expressing, to the highest degree of reality possible, the visual appearance of human skin, which depends upon a variety of anatomical, physiological and external parameters. The model should be based on in-vivo and in-vitro measurements of skin and should allow for interactive change of model parameters with rapid visual feedback, enabling the exploration of different skin appearances in an interactive session. Applications for such a model might be in the entertainment and cosmetics industries. In addition to this, we further want to explore the possibility of simulating appearance changes due to application of selected skin products, such as make-up."



VEIV students' work in skin synthesis has brought about some scarily effective results



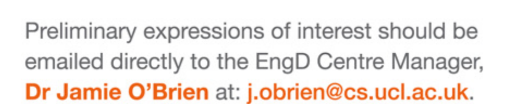
Call for Proposals – Industrial Research 2010-2011

The EngD VEIV Centre is now inviting proposals from industrial and public parties to sponsor engineering doctorate students in computer graphics, graphical modelling, imaging and interfaces. Potential sponsors are invited to UCL Roberts Building (front desk) on 28th September 2010, 2pm to discuss possible projects. Proposals will be accepted until 28th January 2011.

Supported by EPSRC funding, an EngD VEIV student is a first-class engineer or designer with the critical depth and stamina to meet the demands of the entrepreneurial economy. Our students undertake a bespoke, one-year technical training course, followed by three years' full-time work on their sponsor's project.

Additional training is offered throughout. The cost of sponsorship is typically around £36,000 over four years, with occasional concessions offered to charitable sponsors.

Throughout 2010-2011 the EngD VEIV Centre is welcoming in particular proposals addressing issues in graphics and the brain. We anticipate that projects in this field will pertain to visual systems, visualisation, interfaces or interactions, but we are open to all other suggestions for research.



Preliminary expressions of interest should be emailed directly to the EngD Centre Manager, **Dr Jamie O'Brien** at: j.obrien@cs.ucl.ac.uk.

Further details about EngD VEIV are available via our website http://engdveiv.cs.ucl.ac.uk/





Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

- **NAME:** Bigpoint
- **DATE FOUNDED:** 2002
- **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 500+
- **KEY STAFF:** Heiko Hubertz (CEO and founder), Nils Holger Henning (chief communications officer), Dr Jan Wergin (chief technology officer), Lothar Eckstein (chief marketing officer), Michael Gutsmann (chief financial officer), Philip Reisberger (head of games)

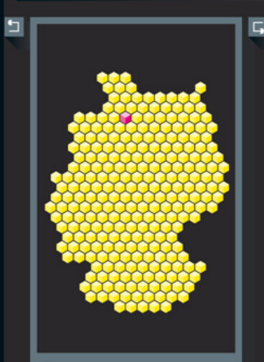


- **URL:** www.bigpoint.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**
  DarkOrbit, *Seafight*, *Farmerama*, *XBlaster*, *War Of Titans*, *Deepolis*



Battlestar Galactica Online (top) is coming soon, but *Farmerama* (above) can be found on Bigpoint's website





- **LOCATIONS:**
  Hamburg (HQ), Berlin, Malta, San Francisco

- **CURRENT PROJECTS:**
  Battlestar Galactica Online, *The Mummy Online*, *Poisonville*, *Mister X*, *ToonRacer* and several unannounced projects

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Founded in 2002 by Heiko Hubertz, Bigpoint's vision has always been to deliver high-quality browser-based games to gamers around the world. To accomplish this goal, Bigpoint has assembled the most creative and talented developers in Europe and the US, empowering them with cutting-edge tools and technology to create innovative games that are free to play without download or installation.

"Since the company's early days, Bigpoint has expanded to over 500 employees, who are encouraged to push the boundaries of creativity in an open and collaborative environment. The company's portfolio of 50+ games illustrates this focus. From space combat to pirate ships, farms and street gangs, Bigpoint games enjoy global appeal.

"With upcoming titles, such as *Battlestar Galactica Online*, *The Mummy*, *Poisonville* and several other unannounced titles, Bigpoint is poised to take online browser-based gaming to the next level. But it's not all hard work and no play at Bigpoint. The company is legendary for is friendly, social atmosphere and after-hours parties, which are important in creating a sense of community at the company. Bigpoint is excited about the future of games… It will be here sooner than anyone might expect."



Bigpoint's *Poisonville* is an ambitious browser-based MMOG that sees gangs battle for control of a city. Currently in beta, it will be launched later this year


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ACTIVISION



BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING Convergence culture

Part three: If you build it, they will come

Ever since I can remember, I have loved using level editors. I got my start before I was even a teenager building *Lode Runner* levels on the VIC-20, by my mid-20s I was making levels in UnrealEd, and my first game industry job was as a level designer. The game level editor was at least as important to my personal creative development as was the word processor. I believe a good level editor can be as engaging and entertaining as a game itself and – when combined with a great game – has the potential to create a positive feedback loop between playing and creating. This is important if you believe – as I do – that playing and creating are fundamentally the same thing.

But designing and building level editors is hard. On one hand, you want to give players unchecked freedom to design and build any environment they can imagine, from a space station to an African savanna to the Eiffel Tower, or even all of these things at once. Conversely, you also want player-created environments to play well within the context of your game. Designing an editor that connects creators who want to express themselves with players who want tightly designed levels is a challenge I believe can be overcome by making level building into a game itself.

The first time I saw a screenshot of the isometric grid of flowerbeds and fences, cornfields and cattle that we call *FarmVille*, I was stricken with clammy-skinned flashbacks of Floaters and Chrysalids. I needed to know where 'Sniper' Sato was, and who was packing the Blaster Launcher. But regardless of superficial similarities, *FarmVille* is nothing like *X-COM*. *FarmVille* is essentially a level building game, and *X-COM* is a game that needs an unending stream of new levels. What a match.

FarmVille affords player expression through the design of farms, and a forum for sharing those expressions with others. The actual gameplay of *FarmVille* is either shoddy, evil or non-existent, depending on your worldview. *X-COM*, by contrast, is a hardcore, singleplayer strategy game in which players express themselves through the way they confront the game challenges. The forum they have for sharing that expression is non-existent (but at least it's not evil).

One of the amazing achievements of *X-COM* is that it uses a procedural 'level assembler' to construct appropriate levels on demand, offering an infinite variety of terrain in which players battle to repel the alien invasion of Earth. Underlying this 'assembler' are simple rules which determine what makes a valid level. *FarmVille* farms, by contrast, are player-generated. Because *FarmVille* explicitly rewards time spent with experience and profit, many *FarmVille* farms are rigorously optimised with dense fields of high-yield crops. But because *FarmVille* is also a platform for socialisation and expression, there is also an incredible variety of farms that reject progression entirely, from eclectic need-one-of-everything collections to idyllic pastoral scenes where some kind of virtual feng shui reigns.

> "The casual revolution – as exemplified by FarmVille – is excluding the hardcore gamer. It doesn't need to be this way"

In order to give players the feeling of scope required by an *X-COM* game, a modern remake must confront a difficult challenge. Building an entire planet's worth of content by hand is not feasible. Procedural generation risks feeling wooden, and lacking in creative flourish. Relying simply on user generation risks undercutting serious themes with an overwhelming percentage of penis-shaped levels. But a game that incentivises players to make appropriate *X-COM* levels can potentially solve this problem.

A casual game for mobile devices or the web that puts players in the role of mayor, farmer or ranger, and gives them the tools to build all the urban, rural and wilderness landscapes needed, while explicitly rewarding their time spent with experience and profit, would quickly generate the required content. Adding another reward axis selecting for designer-defined 'appropriateness' would lead to player-created maps suitable for playing *X-COM* in. Those maps could then be published to the cloud and pulled down by the game on demand. These casual players-cum-level-designers would be rewarded with experience, gifts, rare items and prestige for designing *X-COM*-appropriate environments. Friend management, sharing and publish/subscribe tools would begin to bridge the sadly widening gulf between two important groups of players.

It's been almost 20 years since *X-COM* and an entire generation of similarly hardcore games excluded a massmarket gaming audience a hundred times the size of the audience they chose to service. Today, the pendulum is swinging the other way. The casual revolution – as exemplified by *FarmVille* – is excluding the hardcore gamer. It doesn't need to be this way. We do not have to accept the cynical segregation of diverse audiences when the technology exists today to unite us. By linking our games, we create new domains in which all kinds of players can create, cooperate, compete, collaborate and ultimately converge.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

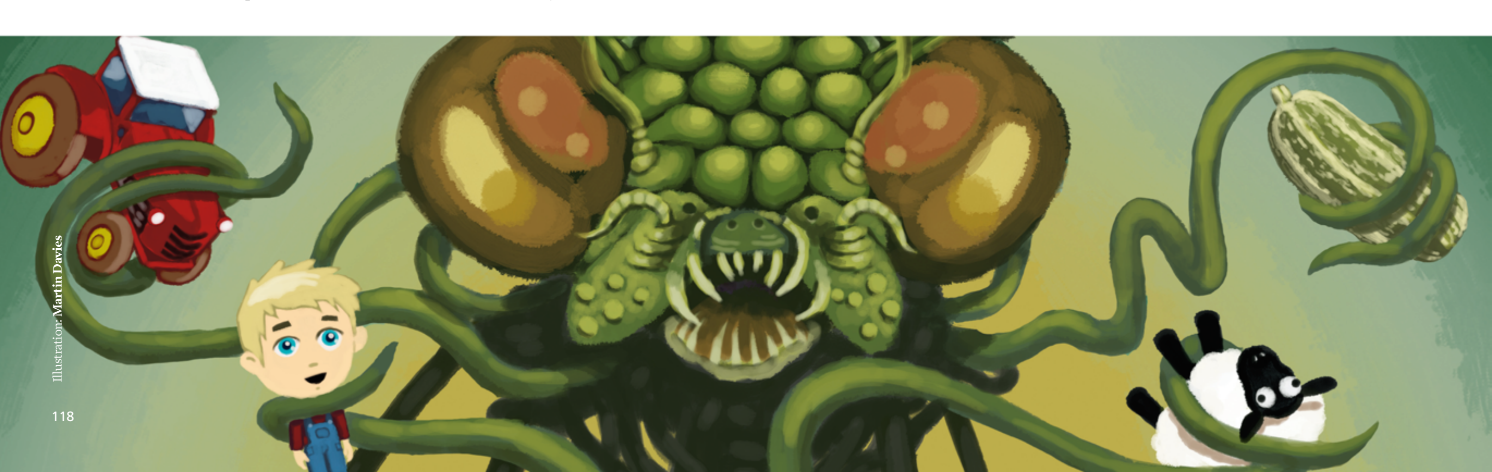


Illustration: Martin Davies


BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Do you speak game?

There aren't too many things that I regret in life, but one of the few is that, as a first-year college student, I didn't apply myself more diligently to my Japanese language class. It seemed like a great idea at the time, and as a game design consultant it would be come in extremely handy today. But back then, the challenge of learning a different alphabet and new rules of grammar was far too daunting for me to stick with it. And, as useful as it would be in my current line of work, I can't see myself devoting the time and energy it would require, given the number of clients I tend to and the amount of time I spend on the road.

Examined from this perspective, I find myself sympathetic to American film critic Roger Ebert's July 1 confession – following yet another videogames-can-never-be-art declaration – that he simply didn't want to spend his increasingly valuable time educating himself about videogames by playing them. This despite the fact that several game developers, readers and friends offered their valuable time to help him get set up with a console and supply him with a few exemplars of the form, of which Ebert wrote, "I knew (1) I had no desire to spend 20 to 40 hours (or less) playing a videogame, (2) Whether I admired it or not, I was in a lose-lose position, and (3) I was too damned bull-headed".

Having not played any games since *Myst*, Ebert was effectively illiterate in the medium. And as much as developers should be constantly aware of accessibility issues with their games, it's not a flaw that's intrinsic to the medium. After all, books would be similarly inaccessible to us if large amounts of time and money hadn't been invested in teaching us how to read. And the same would be true of TV and movies if we weren't all exposed to years and years of moving pictures. So again, I can accept that Ebert would rather spend his work time on film and his leisure time on literature; what *is* something of a loss is that we won't benefit from his keen eye, the quality of his thought and his outsider's perspective on games.

> Books would be inaccessible to us if large amounts of time and money hadn't been invested in teaching us how to read

Fortunately for those of us who are interested in a literate outsider's take on the medium, novelist Nicholson Baker devoted eight pages in the August 9 issue of the New Yorker to sharing his experience with the top commercial games of the previous 12 months, from *Halo: ODST* to *Red Dead Redemption*. By his own admission, Baker had never held a controller until last autumn, yet, curious about this hobby that occupies so much of his son's and his son's friends' time, he plunged into it head first. He reported on his travails and glories with all the naïveté and curiosity of a travel writer or a newly minted foreign correspondent, marvelling at the impressively complicated controllers for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, being taken aback at the length of games (less like a movie and more like an entire season of a TV show) and being taken in by the beauty of the maps and levels in the games that he plays. He pored over game guides, listened to podcasts, experienced the Red Ring of Death and purchased a PS3.

The difference between Ebert's initial volleys and Baker's essay was that Baker maintained an open mind, while Ebert's had been firmly, proudly closed. This isn't to say that Baker didn't form any opinions about individual games or develop a rudimentary taste. He found *Halo: ODST* repetitive; enjoyed the performances in *Uncharted 2*, the lighting in *Red Dead Redemption* and the cynicism of *Modern Warfare 2*; respected the daring of *Heavy Rain*; and objected to the slasher-film amorality of *God of War III*. And while there's a strong sense in which Baker wasn't writing for for you or me – who have played many games and are highly conversant about them – it's invaluable to be reminded just how much interactive literacy high-end console games require; how many conventions and assumptions go unchallenged; how far they have to go and how much the interfaces may need to evolve in order for the medium to become truly massmarket.

In fact, Baker is so observant and eloquent in describing his sojourn in gameland that it's a shame that the New Yorker didn't grant him even more space and time. I would have liked to experience other games through his eyes: *Rock Band*, *Braid*, *Brain Age*, *Desktop Tower Defense*, *FarmVille*. It would have been interesting to get his thoughts on different input devices besides the 360 and PS3 controllers, especially with Kinect and Move shipping this year. And, most of all, I would have loved to have him interview the developers of the games he had played so that he could engage them on aspects of their game from a perspective that they are rarely if ever confronted with. It's been 12 years since I was an outsider, and at the time I couldn't appreciate the usefulness of my perspective because I was so busy trying to keep from drowning in a sea of new information. Now that I speak the language fluently, it's people like Baker who remind me of the importance of looking at games through fresh eyes.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



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TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Not playing FarmVille

It looks like a children's diversion, this isometric, brightly coloured world of aubergines, tomatoes and hoes (exclusively in the agricultural-tool sense, sadly), with friendly lost pigs wandering up to the side of my land, and a user interface that harks back to that glorious 1980s dawn when 'icons!' were the amazing new way to control the most cutting-edge ZX Spectrum and C64 games. And yet *FarmVille* has an amazing 80 million players. Why do so many people play this clunky trash? It's not because they are stupid. The secret is, rather, *FarmVille*'s extremely cunning integration with the website that, in polite daily conversation, I like to refer to by a word that rhymes with 'Duckbook'. And it might cause us to wonder whether 'social gaming' can be, in the broader political sense, rather anti-social.

At least, that is the provocative thesis of a recent essay by AJ Patrick Liszkiewicz entitled Cultivated Play: FarmVille. Liszkiewicz can't believe that people keep playing *FarmVille* because it's fun (as anyone can quickly confirm who hasn't already tried it: it's not fun), or because of the meaningless 'rewards' on offer; rather, they carry on playing because the game cleverly "entangles users in a web of social obligations. When users log into Facebook, they are reminded that their neighbours have sent them gifts, posted bonuses on their walls, and helped with each others' farms. In turn, they are obligated to return the courtesies". It's like a hideously complex extended family Christmas, every day. And this translates into huge revenues for the developers, because it becomes very tempting to pay real money in order to bypass much of the game's most tedious labour.

> There might remain a few videogamers who don't necessary want to be 'retained' or 'connected' in their capacity as mere 'consumers'



Since so many people don't want to disappoint their Auntie Esme, the game thus extracts real-money profits from people's innate decency. This works, but it is pitiless and arguably cynical. Pixel-Lab's David Hayward has called it a 'fuck the users' approach to game development. Meanwhile, Liszkiewicz concludes that *FarmVille* is one of a class of "sociopathic applications", described as "applications that use people's sociability to control those people, and to satisfy their owners' needs".

A similar, if less ethically demanding, critique is efficiently made by Ian Bogost's wonderful parody/experiment, *Cow Clicker*. You click a cow, and then you have to wait six hours to click it again. Friends can click on your clicks. Clicks earn more clicks. You can get even more clicks by buying some in-game currency, called 'mooney', which also allows you to upgrade your cow to a steel or plaid cow, or even a 'sheep cow'.

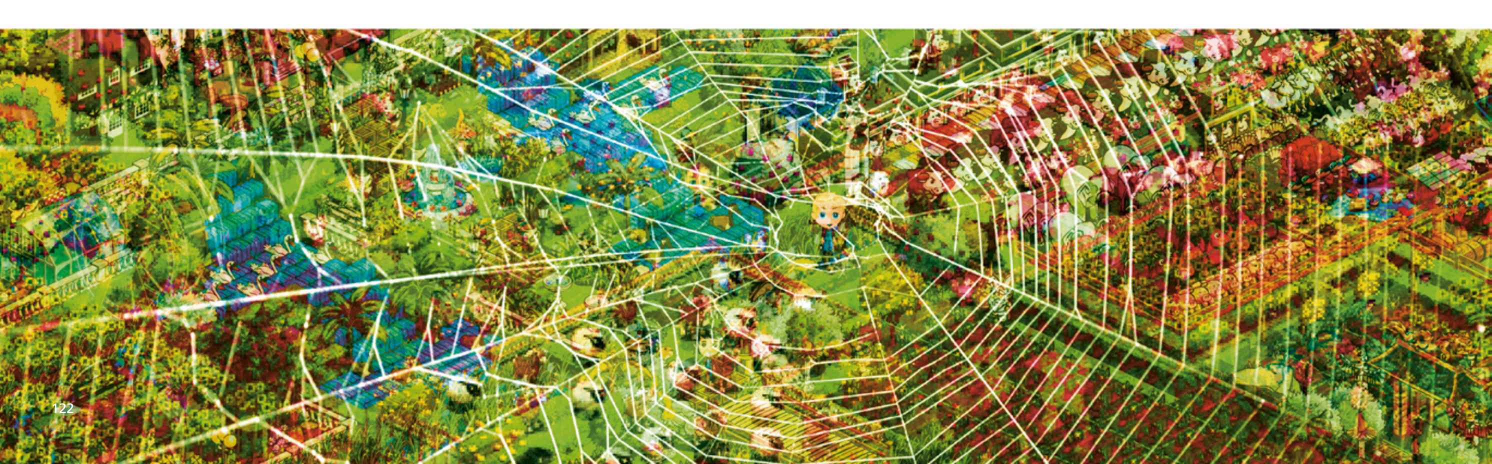
The gameplay content of *Cow Clicker* is somewhere on a curve asymptotically approaching zero; what it does not replicate from its satirical target is all the paraphernalia of rural idyll that *FarmVille* so ruthlessly employs to cosset its users in a fantasy of productive organic farming and tight-knit local community. When I first logged in, an advert shouted "Bees are here!", which is perhaps just as well, since they are decreasing everywhere else. *FarmVille* is, in one way, a masterfully constructed digital utopia: a world fecund, prelapsarian and predictable, where nothing bad ever happens and effort is always rewarded.

As one *FarmVille* defender wrote in response to Bogost: "[People] play so they can build a farm to their exact specifications – a barn over here, a chicken coop over there, a hay bale picture of Mario over there. They play these social games to escape their dreary work-a-day lives and spend some time constructing simple worlds from scratch, and to share those worlds with like-minded friends".

The question remains whether this particular form of escapism and world building is essentially an infantile revenue-making trap in which users become involuntarily trussed, like flies in a spider's web. That, after all, is what developers of these kinds of games happily describe as their win-state. In Tom Chatfield's recent book about videogames – Fun, Inc – for example, the author uncritically reports a Duckbook game developer's confession that his job is all about "figuring out what desirable behaviour is on the part of your players" and inducing it, as though users were simple, Pavlovian subjects to be manipulated. For Chatfield, moreover, it is apparently good news that such games are "the fastest growing area of global expertise in how to entertain, retain and connect 21st-century consumers", even if there might remain a few videogamers, as well as other people, who don't necessary want to be 'retained' or 'connected' in their capacity as mere 'consumers'.

Enough of this. I close Duckbook and pick up my PSP: now I am on a rainswept beach at night, and a crazed sergeant is yelling at me: "If you just stand there like an idiot in front of the enemy, you may as well kill yourself now!" I may be playing on my own, but at least I'm enriching a man with authentic vision. 'Social gamers' of the world, unite: you have nothing to lose but your chains.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net




BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Ebert and the red-headed stepchild

That Roger Ebert. What is this flirtation we have with him, this esteemed film critic who stirs us up like a hornets' nest, pulling our hair like the bully in class? He doesn't fight fair. He has yet to go to the 'extreme' of playing a recent game. He selects poor representatives on our behalf. He summarises our arguments feebly, then attacks those summaries. He works backward from his desired conclusion, seeking a definition of art that excludes videogames on principle. He opines that art is a matter of taste, settling on the achingly uninsightful "We know", with himself as judge, jury and executioner.

Can we admit that falling outside his sympathies is hurtful? He seems a cerebral man with broad experiences, passionate about the arts, having a history of open-mindedness, able to look twice even at questionable films like Point Break. Rather than critique his debating, let's evaluate his positions. He has said that games cannot and never will be art. His argument seems to contain two separate thrusts: qualitative, how the form is used, versus quantitative, attacking the form itself on structural grounds.

Starting with the latter, Ebert states that art "seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices" and "requires authorial control", so therefore the ability of a player to manipulate the medium disqualifies it as art. Assuming that's even true, our form is clearly compatible, no matter how malleable the stories and worlds we offer the player. This seeming contradiction between authorial control and player freedom, with 'abdication of authorship' being our medium's highest calling, has surely affected our ability to be understood and appreciated by more than just Ebert. It resolves via what I term the Possibility Space – the fixed, limited range of interactions possible in the gameworld which is the game author's responsibility to craft into an appropriate artistic work. The point isn't, as Ebert postulates, to make available "every emotional journey". Those words "fixed" and "limited" are important, and one of my illustrative thought experiments is *Betrayal Town*, in which you can forge a variety of friendships, but inevitably each person betrays you in some way, providing insight into the nature of betrayal and making a dark statement about humanity. To paraphrase Clint Hocking, the player's choices don't create or change the art, they reveal it. I suspect that Ebert could imagine the book or film version of *Betrayal Town* he would consider art, and what's important between adaptations is how each medium makes use of its distinct qualities to express the material. Such subtlety can be hard to notice, especially to those unwilling to get their hands dirty. Great sculptors produce works best experienced from different angles and in different lighting. This nuance at the pinnacle of the form would be lost on someone who had only witnessed sculpture through photographs.



> Our understanding of the medium is further advanced than our ability to produce great artistic works with it, and that looks bad

Ebert's qualitative argument is essentially that there is a spectrum between masterpieces and crappy attempts, between great art and 'great trash', and he draws a line below which all games fall. We in the clubhouse know he's wrong, because if he were actually a gamer he'd have had sublime experiences of exploring an environment charged with story and meaning, or some other powerful expression never felt in any other medium. Yet this argument is troubling because he's not in the clubhouse, isn't motivated to join, and is not alone. The games that reach public consciousness aren't terribly convincing from a casual glance. *Flower* truly is about the balance between urban and natural, but when Ebert calls it "pathetic", it smarts because a film, backed up by several decades of evolution, would tackle the subject with far more sophistication. Where, as they say, is our Citizen Kane? That's a question whose answer fills the scope of scholarly research on the interactive form and boils down to: there isn't one. There is not yet a game that draws in the mass of impartial outsiders on its own merits and compels them with its artistry without them feeling they had to be convinced of anything. And no one can say for sure if a Citizen Kane is coming down the pipes or not.

Is there historical significance to this pissing match? Perhaps we should take it as a positive sign that a man who has devoted himself to the medium of the last century misunderstands and criticises us. Mainly, I think Ebert catches us at a vulnerable moment. Our understanding of the medium is further advanced than our ability to produce great artistic works with it, and that looks bad. Thought experiments don't cut it. More recently in a humorous, reflective moment Ebert writes "Okay, kids, play on my lawn", backpedaling a bunch and conceding that we in the clubhouse can believe whatever we want as long as he doesn't have to. With his hybrid personality of endearing, stubborn grandpa and admirable media pundit, Ebert represents the guy we'd really like on our side, would really like to convince without trying, the target audience of the Citizen Kane we hope arrives.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, *is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch*





Illustration: Martin Davies

Inbox



Issue 218



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: BioShock Infinite

***BioShock* in the sky has win written all over it.**

Trailer looked good too, only missing the mark on a glorious opportunity to meld that guy's face with one of the propellers à la Titanic.
Shinji

I'll get the sequel, where they invariably patch up the mistakes from the first.
tempestora

I wish people would stop announcing games so far in advance. It's bad enough Ubisoft splashing cash on four-page colour adverts for games we can buy yet.

But announcing a game we can't buy until 2012? So that's the rest of this year and all of next year? What's the point? Let's bring a little mystery back to this thing we call games.
Bob

Perhaps more than any other, this past E3 brought in to focus the big 'core' versus 'casual' debate. And, ironically, it's exactly this distinction I think will doom Microsoft's Kinect to a dusty future in magazines' 'ten biggest disappointments' features.

The reason? I feel Microsoft has misread Nintendo's strategy. Nintendo doesn't target 'casual' gamers as if they are some sort of chunk in a pie chart; they're genuinely trying (like Sony before them) to make the phrase 'I'm a gamer' an irrelevant distinction – in the same way people don't say 'I'm a cinema goer' or 'I'm a music listener'.

Despite the sceptics, I'm sure a lot of **Edge**'s readers (me included) were excited about Kinect, only to be disgusted by flagrant and over-the-top targeting of the supposed 'casual' market, as if a cute tiger, and fun-looking *Wii Sports* copy alone would dupe the stupid 'casual gamers' into buying 60 million Kinects (warning: they won't).

Microsoft has misread Nintendo's strategy. Nintendo doesn't target 'casual' gamers as if they're some sort of chunk in a pie chart

Here's the thing: every day I'm reminded why the distinction 'casual gamer' holds less and less weight – take my housemate, who's played every last inch of every *Halo* and *Call Of Duty*; my cricket club pal, who's buying a Wii just for the *GoldenEye* remake; and my girlfriend, who was ridiculously excited about *BioShock 2*. They're all linked by one factor: they like great games.

It's safe to say that none of them will ever buy a games magazine, or post in **Edge**'s forums. They don't know what E3 is, and they'd never be seen dead playing online. Hell, they'd probably shudder at the thought of just being mentioned in this letter. Yet each year, they spend a significant amount of money on quality franchises, basing their purchasing decision on what they've played before, what their mates play and what Amazon reviewers tell them. In other words, they buy games the same way as us supposedly 'core' gamers.

When Microsoft (and, to some extent, Sony) realises that Nintendo's success is based not in ripping off the middle classes and families with motion gaming, but on brilliantly realised visions that serve many instead of the few, Kinect will be a success.

I have several consoles, and I'm very excited about the future. I don't care if Nintendo has sold millions of copies of *Wii Play* or *Wii Fit*. They weren't made for me. But the ones that are – the *Halos*, *Mario Galaxys*, *Gears Of Wars*, *LittleBigPlanets* – are also selling in the millions to people like my 'non-gaming' friends because, put simply, they are incredible entertainment experiences. And now, just as regularly they used to chat about the news, movies, books or chart singles down the pub, they'll chat about the last game they played. And that is a very good thing.

Robbie Cooke



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

As an organisation, Microsoft doesn't have a great track record connecting with family audiences (remember *that* Windows 7 launch party ad?), but in the case of Xbox 360 it is at a specific disadvantage because its start point is so much more skewed towards hobbyist gamers than that of Sony or Nintendo. Perhaps it's the moody backdrop of the *Gears Of War* and *Halo* series that makes the breeziness of the Kinect launch line-up seem even more saccharine. Whatever the case, a game like *Dance Central* (see p56) is doing precisely what you're looking for – serving many instead of the few. As for *Kinectimals*, well, we can't look that cute little tiger beast in the eyes and not want to take it home. Naturally, though, we're always willing to accept other viewpoints. If anyone has them...

I can't look at pictures of the smiling tigers in *Kinectimals* without thinking that they're deciding which of my bones they're going to pick clean first.

Ian Judd

When was the last time you felt like booting up the ageing consoles of your childhood and playing games exactly as you experienced them back then? Chances are, you won't be able to do that in the future.

I can't help but notice that more



games these days rely on the internet to offer 'better' or 'unique' experiences to the gamer (*Demon's Souls* comes to mind). The question is, what happens when the game gets old and the servers are closed? Logic says that you'll end up with a lesser game than the one you used to play – surely something that doesn't fully cover the description that's printed on the back of its case.

And what about other forms of content that get distributed through the internet – namely, DLC packs? These are sold on the basis of supply and demand, like any other product. As years and console generations pass by, this means that when there's that's a 'one-time-only' experience these days.

On another note, one of my most beloved games of 2008, the excellent *Prince Of Persia*, offered its actual ending – named 'Epilogue' – in DLC form. Despite the sly move by Ubisoft to make gamers pay extra money for something that should have been included in the disc all along, what comes to mind is that I'll never have the chance of playing the ending of my game in, say, ten years' time, because no one will remember it by then – therefore it will no longer exist – and everyone will be focused on the next best thing, be it *COD12* or *Gran Turismo 6*.

What happens when the game gets old and the servers are closed? Logic says that you'll end up with a lesser game than the one you used to play

no demand for them, they'll no longer be offered. Because they're nothing but data on a remote server, no memory of their existence will remain. Imagine someone who plays *Mass Effect 2* and enjoys it so much that he decides to get all the DLC packs for it. When he's finished with it and uninstalls it from his hard drive, with all the DLC he purchased, maybe that's the last time he plays it to the fullest. He'll never have the chance to relive this gaming experience of the past, because he won't have access to the all of the content he enjoyed. A lot of gaming time is spent on something I want to play the game I enjoyed when I was younger to its full extent. Why can't I have that luxury?
Alexander Garypidis

Microsoft would no doubt suggest that you make the future-proof investment in a new 360 model with a 250GB hard drive, but even then your point about the long-term availability of DLC still stands. It's worth remembering, though, the ways in which digital distribution has preserved access to older titles through services such as Nintendo's Virtual Console – a traditional retail copy of the original *Legend of Zelda* is only any use when you've got a working console to play it on, after all.


Kinectimals **isn't yet doing it for Robbie Cooke and Ian Judd – but for slightly different reasons**



Topic: Forgotten games that were simply great

This is a thread for all of those weird games that didn't have a lot of hype, and have since been lost among the big titles, but you remember, even if you seem to be the only person.

I'm going to start off with a Dreamcast game (actually an arcade port), *Spawn: In the Demon's Hand*. A pure arcade actioner, everything was nice and chunky, totally satisfying.
mr_shoe_uk

***Sonic Shuffle* was great fun. I miss the Dreamcast.**
EFifty

My pick will be *Silent Bomber* on PS1. Kind of 3D *Contra*-esque shooter, complete with anime stylings, ridiculous haircuts and dodgy FMVs.

One of those gems that really paid off when you put the time in, trying to get 'S' rank on each of the missions. Really tense trying to avoid getting hit and keeping the combos going.
Shinji

Sticking with the Dreamcast gives me a chance to mention *Super Magnetic Neo*. Really enjoyed the attract/repel magnet mechanics. It was fiendishly difficult at times too, but always gave you enough lives to keep going – addiction through attrition, similar to, say, *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* giving you infinite continues. It was basically a more challenging *Crash Bandicoot* with a gameplay hook, but I've always felt if it was made by Treasure it would be more fondly remembered. Nice bosses too.
Moot_Geeza

***Blade Runner*. So full of win. God I wish they would make a worthy remake. It was such an awesome game that I found myself never being able to tear away from it. The ambience was perfect, the score, the level design, the voice actors, everything was spot on. Amazing game.**
Woodimari

After recently completing *Red Dead Redemption* and moving on to other games, I started noticing one particular aspect lacking elsewhere. Songs. Not *RDR*'s impressive score, with recurring motifs which provide a backdrop for the whole game, but the more conventional pop/folk song structures found at especially poignant junctures in John's story.

I guessed such a partnering of song and image was more a preserve of film as the director's greater control of the viewer experience allows for greater manipulation of music. However, upon arriving in Mexico, after a tense, elongated gun battle, riding off into the intriguing landscape with Jose Gonzalez's Far Away for accompaniment was as rewarding and perfect a gaming moment as I've had in a long time.

It occurred to me that Rockstar knew that the simple act of just riding would be more than enough to satisfy during my opening minutes on foreign soil. This is a rare example of a developer putting its faith in a player to act out their scene in a (relatively) appropriate manner which is faithful to the story and the character they are trying to present. Of course, I could have compromised the mood by getting off my horse and skinning it or performing or some other out-of-character act. Crucially, though, having the option to stray from the script at any second made the experience more enjoyable than if the song had been used in a cutscene. Perhaps developers might find that gamers know when to screw around and when to run with an idea for the benefit of the experience. You give us the stage and we'll dance to your tune.
Alex Mosely

As you say, it's a question of trust. It works when a player makes the conscious decision to engage with a developer's work in an appropriate manner, but forcing any players who couldn't care less about the narrative and atmosphere to grit their teeth through scripted sequences seems a

Continued

waste of time. The real challenge is in utilising the right tricks and incentives to ensure that as many players as possible buy in. Maybe you'll find some engaging tunes on your new DSi XL.

On the subject of the glamorisation of war that Mark Whitfield touched upon in **E**217, I would like to add that, while I share his disapproval of the way videogames are increasingly being used as military recruitment and technology advertisement vehicles (such as *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* advertising Future Force Warrior), one shouldn't act surprised about this. In fact, what I would like to do is to give some historical context that might go some way towards demystifying this issue.

No doubt anyone remotely into politics is familiar with the 'military-industrial complex' concept first made popular by President Eisenhower, right? Well, that term no longer covers the gamut of what we're looking at – you'll happen to find a new term has been coined by leading academics, such as the 'military-industrial media entertainment complex', or 'military-industrial media complex' in short (several books have been written about this, perhaps the most important being Virtuous War: Mapping The Military-Industrial Entertainment Complex). It turns out that videogames are included as part of that 'complex'.

Specifically, 'emergent gaming' and so-called 'serious games' (or Advanced Learning Technology Platforms – a more pretentious title alluding to the same thing) are seen as a way for videogame companies to stave off financial collapse. For instance, **Edge** ran a feature not too long ago on a company called Total Immersion Software based in Austin, Texas, where it was revealed they are building geographic information system-enabled applications/games for institutions such as DARPA [the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency] – and they're well taken care of, in the sense that as long as the customer is satisfied (in this case, the contractor: the military, DARPA, and so on), then you're in the clear. There's no real risk factor involved or a danger that a competing studio will come out with a killer app that will leave your game in the shade and will instantly bankrupt your startup company overnight.

While serious gaming is new, other aspects of the military-industrial media complex are not. For instance, when Namco and Sega needed to create their highly advanced 3D videogames back in the early '90s for arcade use, they went to defence contractors to obtain cut-down military-grade hardware.

Sega partnered up with Martin Marietta (now Lockheed Martin) to produce the Sega Model 2/3 arcade hardware (more accurately, they went to Real3D – a subdivision of GE Aerospace which was later was bought by Martin Marietta). Namco instead went to Evans & Sutherland, which created the System 22 hardware that powered *Ridge Racer*. All these military contractors have pioneered what they call Computer Image Generators – simply a euphemism for something that creates 3D graphics. Without military contractors becoming involved, it's doubtful *Ridge Racer* or *Daytona USA* would have looked so good in the arcades. The same goes for home technology – Nintendo partnered up with Silicon Graphics to create the Nintendo 64 console. Silicon Graphics was founded by a DARPA grant, and some of its key founders (such as James Clark) previously plied their trade at Evans & Sutherland.

So, one should not feign befuddlement when we happen to find that a lot of videogames seem to have serious militaristic overtones. DARPA sees the partnering up with the entertainment sector as a 'dual-use' business venture – it pays dividends in terms of R&D, and it brings the cost of the technology down.
Daniel De Matteis

True, there are inextricable links between videogames and the military – going all the way back to the bespoke version of *Battlezone* once produced at Atari, of course. As we watch Fox News feasting on the fact that you can 'be' the Taliban in *Medal Of Honor*, it's clear that we're only at the beginning at the discussion, not its conclusion.



Games have always glamorised war, but titles such as *Call of Duty* try to show the dark side, too. Daniel De Matteis should be careful with DARPA – its chief may turn out to be a decoy



Topic: PlayStation Move
I'm genuinely surprised by how big a gap there is in Move and Kinect pre-orders. Sony need to start getting this advertised during Coronation Street or they're gonna struggle.
Diluted Dante

I think Move is a better fit for most, actually. But Kinect seems like something new, and I guess Move doesn't? And it's also too expensive, but then again, Kinect isn't exactly cheap.
-sigge-

That office chair game was certainly the most appealing/wacky game from the whole Move/Kinect thing. Or E3 in general really. But I'm still not sure what's so 'Move' about it. Seems like it would be just as fun as a PSN game on DS3.
Ubermod

I own a 360 but the Kinect tech reminds me of the Ps2 EyeToy (not in a bad way). The cynic in me says that this is a bit of a passing fad, though, and after a couple of hours I will be playing with a pad and the wands will be gathering dust.

Does anyone here own a Wii and still use the motion controller primarily or do you fall back on pad control?
Pointfile

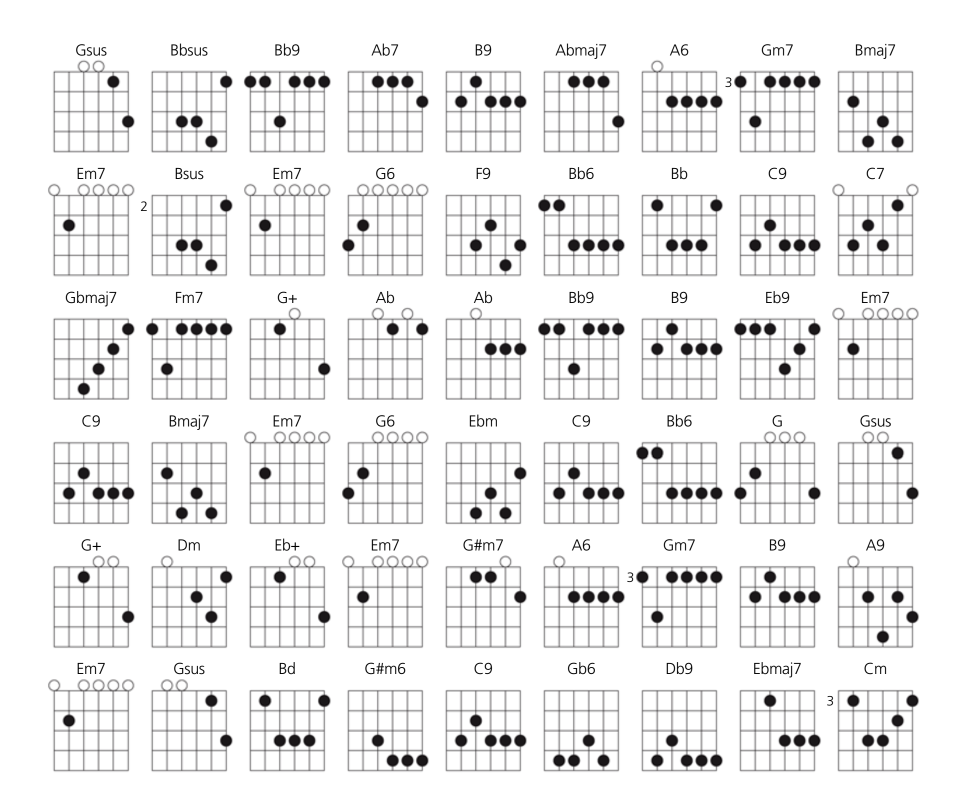
If I do ever turn the Wii on I always use the Remote. Can't remember the last time I used the Classic Controller or the buttons on the Remote.
jmichaelwood

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